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SEATTLE BY AND BY:
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF EMMETT WATSON

by

Erik D. Mickelson

B.S. University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Wash., 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

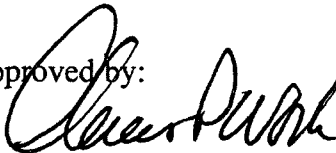
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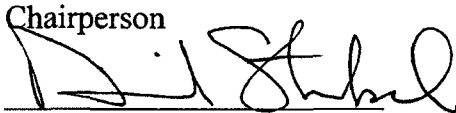
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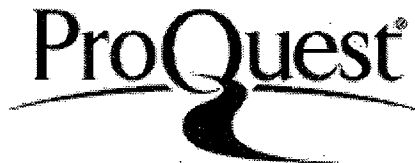


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Journalism

Seattle By and By: The Life and Times of Emmett Watson

Chairperson: Clem Work



When Emmett Watson died at 82 on May 11, 2001, he was Seattle journalism's elder statesman. His journalism career stretched from 1944 to 2000 and included stints at the defunct Seattle Star, The Seattle Times, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The Times again, and finally at the Seattle Union Record strike paper. His longest stretch was 33 years at the Seattle P-I, where his column ran six days a week at its peak. He possessed one of the most famous bylines in the city's history.

He was a native son who came of age in a Seattle that was relatively unpretentious and unsophisticated compared to today. It was a blue-collar town loaded with longshoremen, loggers and fishermen. Watson was modest and self-effacing, and thought of himself as a working-class guy. He spent his early career as a sports reporter and columnist, making the transition in 1956 to writing about city life.

A gifted writer whose prose seemed effortless and buoyant, Watson was alternately thought provoking, whimsical, amusing and defiant. In the mid-1950s, he helped create the tongue-in-cheek Lesser Seattle Inc. to combat rampant development and California immigration. He wrote hundreds of Lesser Seattle columns in the next 40 years. During the apex of his career (1962-1980), he sometimes was called the Conscience of Seattle. He fearlessly spoke out on issues dear to him, including preserving the Pike Place Market, exposing minority discrimination, and getting American soldiers out of Vietnam.

Watson was a local celebrity and a Seattle icon. His column subjects included everyone from Ernest Hemingway, Bill Gates and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas to a succession of pet poodles all named Tiger. He detailed much of his own life on the printed page. Though larger than life when writing about Seattle, his life wasn't glamorous. As the years pass from the last appearance of Watson's byline, his name and journalistic contributions probably will fade from popular knowledge. His voice will endure only in newspaper archives, out-of-print books, the stands he took, and what he helped preserve.

On Nov. 22, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy was shot, Seattle Post-Intelligencer columnist Emmett Watson was in Eastern Washington. He had gone there to cover the Goldmark trial, seemingly one of the year's most important stories.

Watson was one of many prominent journalists and celebrities to gather at the old dungeon-like Okanogan County building for the trial's early proceedings. John Goldmark, a cattle rancher and former Washington state representative, and his wife Sally were alleging that several Eastern Washington members of the anti-communist John Birch Society had publicly implied the couple were communists. John Goldmark said that these people – in meetings, newspaper stories, handbills and pamphlets – had sullied his reputation and smeared his 1962 re-election campaign. The charges of communism were baseless. Goldmark had never supported the communist party, though Sally had been an occasional party member from 1936 to 1943. The Goldmarks eventually won – a major step toward curbing the era's communist paranoia and wrongful prosecutions.¹

The Goldmark attorney was Seattle's William Dwyer, a future U.S. District judge. Watson had come to Okanogan to support Dwyer, a close friend, and maybe write a column or two in the Goldmarks' defense. Typical for Watson; he was rarely far from Washington's hot news and unafraid to defend those wronged.

Even though he'd left Seattle for a couple of days, he continued to write his almost daily, three-dot, about-town columns. Back at the office, his assistant at the time, Sharon Friel, was in charge. A little after 10:30 a.m., Friel was cleaning Watson's mess of a desk when the P-I's Teletype bells rang four times. (Before computers, wire stories were transmitted via Teletype.) Stories that arrived with three bells were considered

urgent. Ringing the bells four times was reserved for immense disasters. When the four-bell United Press International report came in that said Kennedy had been shot in Dallas, the P-I newsroom turned both chaotic and melancholy. Some shocked reporters shuffled numbly around, looking for something to do. Others just cried silently at their desks.

After the initial jolt the newsroom regained composure, with people clamoring for more information and realizing they had a job to do.² Much of the next day's issue concerned Kennedy, his assassination, and its impact on the country.

In Okanogan, court adjourned abruptly at 11 a.m. after news of the assassination reached Superior Judge Theodore Turner.³ It wasn't long before Watson called in to Friel. "What's all this about the president being shot?" he asked. He waited nearly two days for a plane ride home. It was torture being stuck in remote Eastern Washington, where news arrived much slower than in the P-I newsroom. Watson wanted to know every last detail. He called Friel almost hourly for news updates as they came off the Teletype.⁴ In his Nov. 25 column, he expressed the astonished grief of many:

Suddenly, you just wanted to be home. You simply wanted to return to this city where you were raised, to be among friends and loved ones, to receive some obscure kind of reassurance from familiar streets and places. In a little more than an hour, the small plane broke out of the clouds and the city lay below; nothing seemed different. It was the magic hour of dusk, when all the lights burned brightly in the buildings and from high up you could see the cars heading homeward along the boulevards and freeways. But when the plane landed, you realized there was a quietness in the city, a hushed air of shock and numbness.

A man in a bar was saying, "Dammit, he was a fine man. I met him once, right here in Seattle. He spent some time with me, he talked to me, he was fine and warm and natural." You thought he might cry as he talked about it. As though grasping for comfort through association, you remembered that once (it seemed such a short time ago) that you had met Senator Kennedy during his campaign. Pierre Salinger had made the introduction, and you recall mumbling something

¹ Robert Coue, "Okanogan Trial To Explode Battle Of Left Vs. Far Right," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 3 Nov. 1963.

² Sharon Friel, personal interview, 4 May 2002.

³ "Sister-In-Law Takes Stand In Goldmark Libel Trial," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 23 Nov. 1963.

⁴ Friel, personal interview.

like, “Senator Kennedy, Pierre and I are friends from the old days – when he was in the newspaper business,” Kennedy grinned broadly, and you remembered his fine color, and his height and straight posture. He winked slyly and replied, “Well, he’s come a long way down since then, hasn’t he?”⁵

This is how it was with Emmett Watson. Whether it was a communist witch-hunt or the president being shot, he always seemed to be covering or commenting on something Seattleites cared about. What made him so good as a columnist was that he cared, too, and in much the same way.

When Watson died at 82 on May 11, 2001, he was Seattle journalism’s elder statesman. He grew up with the city, his life spanning more than half its history. His journalism career stretched from 1944 to 2000 and included stints at the defunct Seattle Star, The Seattle Times, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The Times again, and finally at the Seattle Union Record strike paper. His longest stretch was 33 years at the Seattle P-I, where his column ran six days a week at its peak. He possessed one of the most famous bylines in the city’s history.

Though he covered some of the century’s biggest stories, Watson was an Everyman. He was a native son who lived the city’s history and courageously spoke out to preserve its way of life. He came of age in a Seattle that was relatively unpretentious and unsophisticated compared to today. It was a blue-collar town loaded with longshoremen, loggers and fishermen. Watson, who attended the University of Washington and played baseball briefly for the minor league Seattle Rainiers, became intimate with the ins and outs of this Seattle.

Using his baseball background, he spent his early career as a sports reporter and columnist, making the transition in 1956 to writing about city life. Most of his about-

⁵ Emmett Watson, “This, Our City: Not So Wild A Dream,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 25 Nov. 1963.

town pieces were three-dot columns, in which assorted news and gossip items were separated by three dots and strung together in a column. It was Watson's single-topic essay columns, though, that brought him the most fame and clout. He had the rare ability to tackle serious issues using clever twists and gentle humor; his incisive opinions excited readers and influenced decisions affecting the city. A gifted writer whose prose seemed effortless and buoyant, he was alternately thought provoking, whimsical, amusing and defiant. He explained complex issues in simple terms, and he deftly exposed lapses in logic.

During the apex of his career (1962-1980), Watson sometimes was called the Conscience of Seattle.⁶ He fearlessly spoke out on issues dear to him, including preserving the Pike Place Market, exposing minority discrimination, getting American soldiers out of Vietnam, and discouraging mindless urban growth. He voiced opinions on just about every major political and social issue in the past half century. His subjects included everyone from Ernest Hemingway, Bill Gates and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas to a succession of pet poodles all named Tiger.

At his peak he was a local celebrity and a Seattle icon. In the 1960s, a Seattle Magazine poll found "Emmett Watson" to be the city's most recognized name.⁷ Watson, though, thought of himself as a blue-collar guy. He was modest and self-effacing, and didn't think his columns were as good as others thought they were. Perpetually insecure after the Great Depression, he feared losing his job even as Seattle's premier columnist.⁸ In print he pretended editors couldn't even remember his name. He said they called him "Watkins" or "Woolsen."

⁶ Fred Brack, personal interview, 18 Feb. 2002.

⁷ James Halpin, personal interview, 2 May 2002.

Though he was friends with development magnates and civic booster bigwigs, his concerns were those of an average denizen in a growing, blue-collar town. As Seattle sprawled upward and outward, Watson watched with a dubious eye and encouraged readers to refuse growth for the sake of growth. He didn't condemn all development efforts. He just condemned those that he believed would make the city a worse place to live. In the mid-1950s, he and some friends created the tongue-in-cheek Lesser Seattle Inc. to combat rampant development and California immigration. As Lesser Seattle's self-appointed dictator, he made fun of civic breast beating. He said citizens weren't responsible for creating Seattle's beauty:

Not many of us (or visiting writers, either) are prone to give enough credit where credit is due. Enough credit, that is, to the guy who made this city beautiful. I refer, of course, to God. It was God, or one of his gifted aesthetic subcontractors, who gave us the water, the trees, the coolness, the gentleness, the hills and mountains, the sense of openness and space. Nothing we have done has improved on any of this. Because we proliferate and urge more people to come and enjoy, all we have done is nearly ruin what we already have.

I would like to apply for the job of Seattle's dictator. Fear not, I would be a benign dictator. A tyrant with a heart, that's me... I would raise enough dough to add more fountains to the city, many more fountains – don't let them kid you about a water shortage in Seattle. Along with these fountains would be statues, dozens of statues, many likenesses of people who made the city great. Make up your own list.

And cops. Maybe 100 or 200 more cops, whatever's needed. If we are so damned beautiful, livable and desirable, let's make every corner of this city a safe place to be. All urban life is dangerous these days. We may not be "world class," but we sure are urban.⁹

His columns charmed three generations of loyal readers. People felt as if they knew him and, in a sense, they did. He detailed much of his own life on the printed page. Though larger than life when writing about Seattle, his life wasn't glamorous. Average

⁸ Brack, personal interview.

⁹ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: We Can Do Better," *The Seattle Times* 28 July 1991.

Joes could relate to him because he ate at their restaurants, walked their beaches, frequented their garage sales, bought their dilapidated cars, drank their stouts, and wrote about it all.

“Watson was classic Seattle,” wrote Seattle P-I reporter Jon Hahn in an obituary, “sort of laid back, but as well politically connected as he was sometimes politically incorrect, calling things as he saw them.”¹⁰

Watson loved Seattle, even if he didn't love its steady “progress.” The Pike Place Market, Pioneer Square, the Fremont neighborhood, Alki Beach, the Kingdome and Safeco Field were just a few of his favorites. In his 1992 book “Once Upon a Time in Seattle,” he wrote:

Seattle is still a good city, replete with people of strength and character, creativity and brains. No matter how much it becomes gentrified, or adopts the passing fads of this late twentieth century, the city is still uniquely its own, one of a kind. I can think of no other place quite like it.

He seemed naturally suited for his job. A voracious reader of newspapers and history books, he was inquisitive. When confused or needing further information, he just called one of hundreds of sources to get the inside scoop. He counted himself a lucky man: He was paid to write and learn all about Seattle – two things he enjoyed immensely.

He stayed a columnist so long because it was his way of life and part of his identity. What he liked best about the job was the chance to meet and talk to all types of people:

Some are interesting, some are dull. Some are knaves and fools. But quite often you find special people and you treasure making friends with those who are beyond and above the ordinary.¹¹

¹⁰ Jon Hahn, “Lesser Seattle's press secretary Emmett Watson dies at 82,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 12 May 2001.

¹¹ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: An elegant man, an honored physician and pilot, is gone,” The Seattle Times 21 July 1998.

Growing old neither softened his liberal views nor discouraged his resolve to push the envelope. In time, skyscrapers, cookie-cutter suburbs and strip malls changed Seattle. But Watson didn't become bitter or dwell on old problems. He continued to rally his troops to expose absurdity and injustice. His voice remained vibrant because he examined issues knowledgeably, honestly and with piercing vision.

Shortly before his death he was still at the top of the game, his columns touching on everything from the Microsoft subculture to Bill Clinton's sexual habits. In 1998, he wrote:

President Clinton is known throughout the right wing as a "philandering liberal." This is good. He will go down in history as a political leader with a fixation on the opposite sex, the way George Washington was preoccupied with cherry trees and Abraham Lincoln with writing speeches on the backs of envelopes. All this is good, I say, because it takes history out of the dry recitations of footnotes; history is being sexed up for popular consumption.¹²

As Skid Road, lumber mills and cable cars gradually were replaced with art museums, Microsoft and Interstate 5, Watson gave readers a glimpse of Seattle's past. The 1962 World's Fair, the Seattle Rainiers baseball team, the early years of The Boeing Company and profiles of Seattle's political and social pioneers were recurrent column themes. Watson, thus, was a link to bygone times while being firmly in touch with the present. After the 1999 World Trade Organization riots, he cautioned Seattle that it shouldn't take too seriously its reputation for gentle, urban sophistication:

We have been pictured as an urban paradise – a city with values, heads-on-straight citizens, unpretentious, outdoorsy, very polite. In reality, we are just another big city with lots of problems.

¹² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Recipe for good citizenship: add sex to politics," The Seattle Times 14 April 1998.

Oh, shame! Our image is tarnished. We are besmirched. We lost our aura. What becomes of a city that blows its pristine reputation for politeness, orderliness, middle-class propriety and friendly disposition?

Before we go fancy-lace here, it should be remembered that this city was not created by civic designers. It came out of Paul Bunyan country, with Babe the Blue Ox as a house pet. This gracious-living rain capital still hosts a highly competent array of hustlers, con men, frauds, roughnecks and thieves. We forget that, because we got a little mud on our shoes.¹³

Others preceded him in chronicling this city, and already others have supplanted his columnar toehold on Seattle journalism. One year after his death, “Emmett Watson” is no longer a household name in Seattle. As the years pass from the last appearance of Watson’s byline, his name and journalistic contributions probably will fade from popular knowledge. He realized that newspapers have a short shelf life and his fame wouldn’t endure – after six months he routinely repeated column ideas, thinking nobody would notice.¹⁴ His voice will endure only in newspaper archives, out-of-print books, the stands he took, and what he helped preserve.

Born on the Duwamish Mudflats

Emmett Watson was born Nov. 22, 1918 to Lena and Garfield McWhirt of West Seattle. He was named after Robert Emmett, the Irish revolutionary who in 1803 led a failed rebellion against Great Britain. A year after Emmett’s birth, his mother and twin brother, Clement, died in the 1918 flu epidemic that killed 20 million worldwide and 1,600 in Seattle. Garfield McWhirt, a streetcar conductor and bartender, was left to look after his remaining infant.

¹³ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: So our image is tarnished? Just whose image is that?” *The Seattle Times* 21 Dec. 1999.

¹⁴ Halpin, personal interview.

“He couldn’t take care of me,” Watson once wrote. “For real, he couldn’t.”¹⁵

Fortunately, McWhirt knew John and Elizabeth Watson of West Seattle, a young couple with four children and extra space in their home. They agreed to adopt Emmett.¹⁶ The Watsons were a working-class family with New England origins – John Watson was a contractor who dug basements with a team of horses and a large scoop shovel.

“Going along with him,” Watson wrote, “with his wagon and horses, was my first introduction to many of the neighborhoods that make up the city.” Spending so much time in dirt holes also familiarized him with a Seattle trademark – the thick, sloppy mud that pervades the Puget Sound landscape.¹⁷

Like most U.S. cities, Seattle was devastated by the 1929 stock-market crash. By 1931, wages had fallen 35 percent and 20,000 people were unemployed. Construction had decreased 70 percent. Forty Northwest lumber mills had closed.¹⁸ Hundreds of citizens lived in Seattle’s “Hooverville,” a shantytown a few blocks south of Pioneer Square where the unemployed elected their own mayor and enforced their own laws. The place was named after President Herbert Hoover, whom many blamed for the Depression.

When hard times hit, John Watson moved the family to a farm in the Cascade Mountains foothills. They couldn’t starve if they raised their own food, he reasoned. The property was near Carnation, Wash., at the site of today’s Remlinger Farms – headquarters of the Remlinger U-Pick berry empire.¹⁹ Remlinger annually hosts more

¹⁵ Jack Broom, “Emmett Watson, 1918-2001; Seattle loses its longtime chronicler,” The Seattle Times 12 May 2001.

¹⁶ Lea Watson, personal interview, 10 May 2002.

¹⁷ Emmett Watson, Digressions of a Native Son (Seattle: The Pacific Institute, Inc., 1982) 7.

¹⁸ Ross Anderson, “Gritty ‘Old Seattle’s’ last stand: the 1930s,” The Seattle Times 29 July 2001.

¹⁹ Watson, Digressions 76.

than 200,000 visitors who frequent its restaurant, ice cream parlor, fruit stands and amusement park.²⁰ But in the 1930s it was mostly just evergreen forests and farmland.

After spending early childhood in Seattle, Watson had a tough time growing accustomed to farming's isolation and rigorous chores, which included forking hay, churning butter, bringing in wood and milking a cow.²¹ He was sickly and frail as a child, and a severe ear infection left him mostly deaf in both ears. Later in life he required two hearing aids that he said were "so powerful (they) can pick up talk shows in Taiwan."²²

Watson found solace in his imagination, inventing make-believe baseball games using the lineups of the Seattle Indians and their Pacific Coast League rivals – the San Francisco Seals and Los Angeles Angels.²³ He dreamed of returning to Seattle to watch the Indians play. Though mostly bored, he discovered a few rural hobbies – walking for miles on the railroad tracks that bypassed the family farm and catching dog salmon by the tail at a nearby stream. Late at night, he stayed up reading "Tom Sawyer," "Huckleberry Finn," pulp westerns and lots of Zane Grey books.²⁴

Watson's father worked hard. But the market for his crops proved scarce, and the family struggled to survive. Once his father spent a year growing peas, only to give the crop to Seattle friends when it didn't sell.²⁵ The family eventually lost the farm, returned to Seattle and went on relief. Their Seattle house, about two miles north of an infant airplane company called Boeing, was on the bluffs above the Duwamish tide flats.

²⁰ <http://www.remlingerfarms.com>.

²¹ Watson, *Digressions* 74.

²² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Tuning Out the Guv," *The Seattle Times* 19 June 1990.

²³ Watson, *Digressions* 75.

²⁴ *Ibid* 75.

²⁵ *Ibid* 76.

It was a time when you couldn't buy employment. John Watson worked odd jobs and Emmett helped out, selling newspapers on the waterfront.²⁶ Without steady work, his father spent days standing in commissary lines and helping Emmett sell newspapers. He eventually tired of the struggle, and became a more apathetic parent and husband. The Depression eroded his passion for life.²⁷

Watson would not forget his father's humiliation. Although his family did its best to shield him, he couldn't ignore the commissary lines, the joblessness, the despair and bewilderment. Even as a celebrated newspaperman with an assistant and claim to the best tables in Seattle's restaurants, Watson still saw himself as a working-class man and stayed skeptical of politicians who were slow to ease poverty.²⁸

It wasn't all despair. Seattle in the 1930s was young and coarse, an exciting place to grow up. It was a remote, isolated city of 350,000. Residents harvested timber and fish and shipped them to far-off places. It had been just 80 years since the Denny Party landed at Alki Beach, and some Seattle residents were still alive who had known these city founders. City officials realized the futility of enforcing morality laws in this still-frontier town. For decades, downtown's Skid Road was a district of saloons, casinos and brothels. It was a place where casino men taught high-school boys, for a fee, the subtleties of gaming, and gave kids membership cards to underground casinos.²⁹ Glad to be free from the farm, Watson habitually skipped classes at Madison Junior High to hang out downtown. He hitchhiked or took a streetcar from his West Seattle house to the bustling waterfront to watch the goings-on.

²⁶ Watson Digressions 11.

²⁷ Ibid 236.

²⁸ Brack, personal interview.

²⁹ Murray Morgan, Skid Road (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1951) 175.

Drinking didn't decrease during prohibition because slack enforcement by crooked cops made booze accessible. Watson's father kept a stash of bootleg whiskey in the back room of a pool hall on the corner of California Avenue and College Street. When his dad came to deplete the stash, young Watson was brought along. He became a pool shark by his pre-teens.³⁰ For Watson, it was a fun education. He later wrote:

The old waterfront was for real. It wasn't a place for tourists (a tourist stood a fair chance of getting rolled), or boutiques and import shops; it was crowded, smelly, tough and altogether splendid ... Skid Road then was a haven for loggers, dockworkers, tree toppers and a heavy flow of transients ... You could get a bowl of soup for a nickel, in a place run by a suspicious old son of a bitch who made you put the nickel on the counter before you got the soup.³¹

We took (Seattle's) beauty for granted and didn't try to hustle tourists with it. This was before they knocked out those wonderful cable cars on Yesler, James and Madison. Mountains, water, beaches, trees and views were something you had, like mud and wet feet, and you didn't brag about one and apologize for the other.³²

A Catcher's Squat

Growing up, Watson played baseball every chance he got – vacant lots, streets, playgrounds and cow pastures all became ball fields. When he wasn't playing, he was watching the Seattle Indians. The Indians, Seattle's only professional sports team, played at Civic Field, built at the base of Queen Anne Hill where the Space Needle, Experience Music Project and the Seattle Opera House stand today. But unlike these modern Seattle icons, Civic Field was neither sophisticated nor architecturally impressive. It was a microcosm of old Seattle – a dirt field with rocks, rickety fences and worn bleachers. In the sun it was a dustbin. In the rain it became a pond. As the name implies, the field was

³⁰ Watson, *Digressions* 7.

³¹ Emmett Watson, *My Life in Print* (Seattle: Lesser Seattle Publishing, 1993) xxv.

³² Watson, *Digressions* 7.

a community-gathering place where dockworkers and bankers sat together to cheer on the local club. Watson and his friends watched dozens of great players there on their way to the major leagues – including Joe and Dominic DiMaggio and Ted Williams.³³

In his teens, Watson often sneaked into games, climbing the wire-mesh outfield fence when security wasn't looking.³⁴ He dreamed of one day playing professionally:

I grew up on the streets and playfields of Seattle, never bothering much about our wondrous scenery; the mosaic of my dreams was the inside of a baseball park. My goal was to get out of Seattle – to Detroit, St. Louis or New York, where I would play major league baseball.³⁵

He didn't leave much time to study – the daily grind of school bored him. Even as a young man he appreciated and pursued life's earthier pleasures. He discovered early on a preference for playing Chinese lottery and visiting downtown brothels to studying mechanical drawing or algebra.³⁶

Watson held a lifelong affection for women, and many returned the favor. As a teen he fell in love with a prostitute named Babe who worked at an International District brothel on Maynard Avenue. Babe gave him a "student rate," charging one dollar instead of the usual two.

"She couldn't have been more than nineteen," Watson wrote later. "She had natural, genuine blond hair, which she wore long, and she had a fine, smooth complexion, about the color of vanilla ice cream, and she was no makeup junkie."³⁷

Emmett stumbled into high school coursework, spending two indifferent years at West Seattle High School. He then transferred to Franklin High, where he became a standout prep catcher. To make money, he played on a semiprofessional team on

³³ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Memories of Baseball in Seattle," The Seattle Times 7 April 1985.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Watson, Digressions 5.

³⁶ Ibid 15.

weekends.³⁸ In baseball, catcher is the most intense, dynamic position besides pitcher. The catcher is the signal caller and field general. Watson liked the position because he saw the whole field and was involved in every pitch.³⁹

He first considered a journalism career at Franklin High, where he discovered a talent and fondness for putting words on paper. He told baseball coach Ralph “Pop” Reed that he wanted to be the next Paul O’Neil, a star P-I reporter. Pop told him to take typing lessons because, as he put it, “You couldn’t take your hat off in a newspaper if you can’t type.” Watson took two semesters of typing.⁴⁰

In 1937, Watson’s senior year, Franklin’s team went undefeated. To Watson’s delight, the players became Seattle celebrities who were recognized on the street and received free admission to Indians games. Almost all the team’s starters were offered professional contracts.

But Watson wasn’t quite talented enough to secure a professional contract. He continued to play semipro baseball, though, and sometimes caught for right-handed hurler Ed Liston. Liston not only was a pitcher, he was Watson’s history teacher at West Seattle High. As a student, Watson occasionally caught a game for Liston on Sunday and sat in his class Monday morning.⁴¹ Liston urged Watson to meet with the dean of admissions at the University of Washington. Swayed by Watson’s sweet talking, the dean overlooked his 1.45 high school grade point average and accepted him on probation.⁴²

Watson learned to study in college – he found college coursework more stimulating than that in high school. Also, he realized that with one failing grade he’d be

³⁷ Watson, *Digressions* 15.

³⁸ *Ibid* 16.

³⁹ Halpin, personal interview.

⁴⁰ Watson, *Print* 1.

⁴¹ Watson, *Digressions* 16.

in a very skimpy job market without an education. He acutely remembered the time his father was forced to give away bushels of peas.

He majored in communications and didn't take journalism because his lousy high school transcript lacked the math and foreign language requirements to get into journalism school.⁴³ Also, the economy was still feeling the slumps of the Great Depression. Since getting a manual labor job was so difficult, he assumed that finding a newspaper job would be nearly impossible.⁴⁴

He made Washington's baseball team and the coach, Tubby Graves, got him odd jobs to finance his schooling. His first job out of high school was at a sawmill in Selleck, Wash., a tiny town in the Cascade Mountains foothills. Watson worked in the millpond, rolling big logs that eventually were given to the lead sawyer, who cut the wood with a giant, steam-driven circular saw. "It was not thought to be a handicap that I couldn't swim," he later said.⁴⁵ By 1939 he was employed at Boeing, a job he said put the "made in Seattle" stamp on him. He worked the swing shift, filing rough edges of aluminum pieces cut by a band saw. The job was so monotonous he sometimes deliberately cut his finger on the file so he could earn a half-hour trip to the infirmary.⁴⁶ He continued to play semipro baseball, earning up to \$8 a game, which beat the \$15 a month he made at Boeing. Because his college coaches looked the other way, he maintained his amateur status with the UW baseball team.⁴⁷

⁴² Watson, *Digressions* 16.

⁴³ *Ibid* 1.

⁴⁴ Brack, personal interview.

⁴⁵ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Can it be - only one sawmill left in the Seattle area?" *The Seattle Times* 18 Jan. 2000.

⁴⁶ Watson, *Digressions* 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 85.

In 1942 Watson graduated from college. Near deaf, he was classified 4-F in the military draft.⁴⁸ He thought about becoming an anthropologist or teacher, but instead took a job as a longshoreman at Seattle's Todd Shipyards. In those days, hearing aids were colossal and cumbersome, and Watson wanted no part of them. Longshoring, which didn't require good hearing, seemed to suit him.⁴⁹

Longshoring also didn't require much brains. For \$1 an hour, he loaded Liberty ships with cement, grain, canned food, liquor for officers' quarters, toilet paper, and anything else to advance the war in the Pacific Theater. Watson hated the work, which he called cold, miserable, boring and demeaning.⁵⁰

Watson's blue-collar days helped him meet the kinds of people who made up the Seattle of the 1930s and 40s. He met all sorts of roughnecks, lumbermen and factory types – and for the most part he liked them. He didn't forget where he came from. As a memento, he always kept a longshoreman's metal cargo hook in his bedside drawer.⁵¹

In the fall of 1942, a few months after graduating from UW, he was drafted by the Seattle Rainiers. The team had changed its name from the Indians to the Rainiers in 1938.⁵²

Emmy, as his teammates called him, replaced an injured second-string catcher for three weeks in the late 1942 season. When the catcher healed, Watson was released. Though he didn't play a single game that year, the team invited him to the following year's spring training.⁵³ As the 1943 season began, Watson was one of several 4-Fs who

⁴⁸ Brack, personal interview; Ottenberg, personal interview.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Watson, *Digressions* 11.

⁵¹ Brack, personal interview.

⁵² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Memories of Baseball in Seattle," *Seattle Times* 7 April 1985.

⁵³ Ibid.

made the team after more established players were shipped to the battlefield.⁵⁴ During the team's first home game he was brought in to pinch run. A teammate hit a single and Watson, rounding third base with time to score, fell down in front of 9,000 fans. He crawled back to third and barely made it in time. The Rainiers released him the next day.⁵⁵ Watson later wrote:

I stayed with the Seattle Rainiers long enough to learn the bunt sign and drink two cups of coffee. Bill Skiff, the manager, released me in 1943. "Kid," he said, "you have a great future. Offhand, I cannot imagine where it might be, but I'm sure you have a great future. Drop back and see us sometime."⁵⁶

Though his inability to hit a curveball, among other things, made him expendable, Watson could do one thing better than any other catcher, according to Manager Skiff.

"I will tell you about this kid Watson," Skiff reportedly said, "He does one thing as well as any catcher I've ever seen. I have watched a few catchers in my time – Cochrane, Dickey, Hartnett and Harry the Horse Danning. I will tell you this. None of them could squat better than Watson."⁵⁷

Star Reporter

Seattle boomed during World War II. With Boeing and the Puget Sound, it was a production center and port of embarkation. Puget Sound shipyards built hundreds of destroyers, tenders and carriers, and Boeing mass produced B-17s and B-29s. Defense-industry jobs were plentiful. Thousands of people from around the country were recruited for Seattle's wartime work. The city's black population increased from 4,000 to nearly

⁵⁴ Ottenberg, personal interview.

⁵⁵ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Memories of Baseball in Seattle," *The Seattle Times* 7 April 1985.

⁵⁶ Emmett Watson, "Quick Watson – The Needle: A Reluctant Autobiography," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 30 Jan. 1950.

⁵⁷ Watson, *Print* xxi.

30,000. Its overall population rose from 368,000 in 1940 to 467,000 by 1950.⁵⁸ To help fill the void of departing soldiers, women entered the work force en masse. Though many of these jobs disappeared after the war, Seattle was irrevocably changed. The Pacific Northwest had become more industrial and racially diverse; it would remain so.

After his release from the Rainiers, Watson dreaded returning to the loading docks. Thinking he may have a talent for writing, he began to nurture the notion of a journalism career.⁵⁹ During the summer of 1944 he started writing and editing for *The Umpire*, a newsletter published by local semipro players who called themselves the 3-and-0 Club. The newsletter was sent to France, Italy, England and the South Pacific to soldiers who played baseball in the Northwest before the war. It had news about Northwest baseball and reported the mass of players who had become war casualties.⁶⁰ Soon after World War II ended, Chick Garrett, the *Seattle Star*'s sports editor, saw his work in *The Umpire* and offered him employment. The *Star* installed Watson as its Rainiers beat reporter – editors thought it would be good to have a former Rainier cover the team.⁶¹

With local legends like Fred Hutchinson, Jo Jo White and Edo Vanni – who were also Watson's friends – the Seattle Rainiers of the 40s and 50s were fun to watch. Fans loved these rollicking, tough-to-beat Rainiers. One player, Bill Schuster, was known as "Schuster the Rooster" because he climbed the grandstand screen and crowed like a rooster after wins.⁶² Team owner Emil Sick was a local beer brewer who built the \$350,000 Sicks' Stadium in 1938. Located in the Rainier Valley next to Franklin High

⁵⁸ Mike Barber, "Seattle grew strong in the war, but the future felt ominous," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 26 Nov. 26 1999.

⁵⁹ Ottenberg, personal interview.

⁶⁰ Watson, *Print* 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid* 3.

⁶² Alan J. Stein, www.historylink.org/welcome.htm 14 July 1999.

School, the stadium packed in as many as 12,000 fans a game. From 1938 to 1952, Seattle had the highest attendance of any minor league team. For Watson, a sports addict adept at putting words to paper, being paid to follow the Rainiers was a dream job.

The Star was an aggressive, working-class afternoon newspaper, third in circulation to The Seattle Times and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. First published in 1899,⁶³ it was the paper Watson's father read when Watson was growing up.⁶⁴

When he started out, a journalist with a college degree was unusual. Newspapering was a blue-collar job, a way someone with a knack for words could get off the loading docks and knock on the door of the middle-class world. The college-educated Watson was a rarity.⁶⁵ Also at this time Watson married the former Betty Lea. The two were married 28 years and had two children, Lea and Nancy. Though they divorced in 1972, they stayed friends.⁶⁶

Watson's first byline appeared on June 10, 1944, with his name misspelled as "Emmitt." His training at the Star was on the job. In effect, the paper served as a school of journalism; he later called it "Seattle Community Column College."⁶⁷ He was taught to "know your subject and write about things that people can relate to."⁶⁸ He also learned to write catchy headlines, paste the sports page in the back shop, never use the term "irregardless" and drink whiskey sours when work was done.⁶⁹

Soon Chick Garrett told Watson to start his own sports column. On March 26, 1945, "The Bullpen Barber" appeared. The column didn't run regularly. "Bullpen"

⁶³ "The Seattle Star Suspends Today," The Seattle Star 13 Aug. 1947.

⁶⁴ Watson, Print 3.

⁶⁵ Brack, personal interview.

⁶⁶ Watson, personal interview.

⁶⁷ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: The Extractor? He was more like The Exorcist for toothache pain," The Seattle Times 1 June 1999.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Watson, Print 3

referred to his stint as bullpen catcher for the Rainiers, and “barber” was baseball jargon for a talkative person.⁷⁰

While at the Star, Watson was still catching for a semipro team at \$15 a game, two games a week. Once he wrote an article on a no-hitter thrown by Al Libke, a pitcher in the Shipyard League. Not wanting to brag, he didn’t mention he had caught Libke’s no-hitter.⁷¹ But playing in the Shipyard League almost ended his journalism career before it began. While he was competing against the local Coast Guard team, a foul tip broke and dislocated his right pinky finger. He could barely type with the large cast. Since he didn’t want to risk his newspaper career on another injury, this was the last semipro game he played.⁷²

Watson had good reason to guard his day job. After World War II, 38,000 veterans returned to the Puget Sound workforce.⁷³ During the war, nearly 200,000 men and women had worked in area shipyards. By 1946, shipyard employment shrank to 10,000. Across America, wages had fallen for those who held jobs. Unions struck back; more than five million Americans went on strike.⁷⁴ Watson felt lucky to have a paycheck.

Never to forget the dull months spent loading ships on freezing cold Elliott Bay, he was captivated by journalism. He worked relentlessly for fear he would lose his job and have to return to the “awful labor of longshoring.”

“This fear has stayed with me all through journalism, the fear that someday I would have to return to honest work,” he later wrote.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Watson, Print 11.

⁷¹ Ibid 6.

⁷² Ibid 6.

⁷³ Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, “The Postwar blues,” The Seattle Times 14 July 1996.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Watson, Print 3.

To make a few extra bucks and fill his free time, he worked full time for United Press International, which shared the Star's office. After writing and editing all day at the Star, at 5 p.m. he moved to the UPI room and rewrote news stories and features until 1 a.m. By 7 a.m. he was back to work at the Star's sports desk. He soon found his talent and disposition suited for newspaper life. The long, late hours devoted to newsgathering, drinking and cavorting satiated his intellectual curiosity and adventurous spirit. He also discovered an instinctive way with words and with people. He already had a strong command of language and subtle observation.

Dr. Watson's Needle

With the Star in a perpetual financial crisis, on April 27, 1946 Watson left the newspaper for the Seattle Times, a larger, better paying and more conservative paper.⁷⁶ The Star finally folded on August 13, 1947. Management cited increased labor costs and a shortage of newsprint as causes for its demise.⁷⁷

His early Times columns were called "The Press Box" and, later, "Dr. Watson's Needle." The latter was named after Sherlock Holmes' bumbling, well-meaning sidekick, Dr. Watson. Always self-deprecating, Emmett thought "Dr. Watson" to be an apt appellation.⁷⁸

At The Times, he worked under Managing Editor Russell McGrath, who Watson said brought a "Cromwellian ethic" to The Times stylebook. McGrath ran The Times mostly by use of memos, and some of the memos could sting.⁷⁹ An example of this happened after Watson interviewed the professional wrestler Gorgeous George for his

⁷⁶ Watson, *Print* xxxiv.

⁷⁷ "The Seattle Star Suspends Today," *The Seattle Star* 13 Aug. 1947.

column. George, a villain, acted like an 18th century English dandy; he entered the ring wearing a flowered robe to the tune of “Pomp and Circumstance.” His story never appeared, however, after McGrath sent a saber-sharp memo. “Watson!” it read. “The sacred pages of The Seattle Times will never be used, by you or anyone else, to advance the sordid fortunes of this perfumed lout.”⁸⁰

Watson sometimes pushed columns beyond just sports. They became personal, insightful glimpses of the people who played on the field. In 1946, he wrote a feature on Fred Provo, a UW halfback who left for World War II, was injured by a German mortar, and returned to the team with a new life perspective:

You come back older, heavier, smarter, and with a decent respect for being alive. You return with scars on your back, and a jagged one across your chest, to a game they said you’d never play again.

It’s a nice day. You come out of the tunnel in front of 40,000 people, and the sunlight hits the gold “33” on your jersey, a nicer number than a G.I. dog tag.

The program says you’re Fred Provo, a left halfback. The student section, bigger than it’s ever been before, is yelling like every other section of its kind, and most of the rooters don’t remember when Freddy Provo was a third-string halfback in 1942.

The Husky left halfback, who runs like there was a law against being tackled, is back to play a safer game. He had a large piece of the Second World War laid right in his lap as a 21-year-old sophomore.⁸¹

It was stories like this that got Watson noticed. McGrath liked his copy, and in 1947 The Times sent him to cover the World Series between the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers. When he arrived in New York the day before the series, he wrote a feature story on a twilight visit to Yankee Stadium. He wrote poetically about gazing for

⁷⁸ Brack, personal interview.

⁷⁹ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Return to The Times,” The Seattle Times 30 Oct. 1983.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Emmett Watson, “The Press Box: Fred Provo Returns,” The Seattle Times 29 Oct. 1946.

the first time upon a “yawning, lonely, darkened, triple-decked Yankee Stadium.”⁸² The only problem was the story was a fabrication; he confessed years later that he wrote it from his hotel room.⁸³ Notwithstanding this indiscretion, his World Series coverage was well received and popular in this time before mass television.⁸⁴

Watson contracted polio in the fall of 1949 and almost died. He spent three weeks in Harborview Hospital’s isolation ward. When he was released, he was left weakened and with a pronounced, permanent limp. For a time after the disease he was too lame to venture out of The Times’ office. This hastened his transition in 1950 from a traveling sports reporter and columnist to a full-time sports columnist who worked the telephones and put out three or four columns a week. He never returned to beat reporting.⁸⁵

In the winter of 1950, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer lured Watson away from The Times, bragging about its steal for days with front-page stories and photographs of him and family. Watson even wrote a short, front-page autobiography. Years later he characterized what happened as “a grotesque, Barnumesque buildup.”⁸⁶

Watson was glad to be at the P-I, a morning paper. He had the chance to write morning-after sports columns instead of the soft, second-day stories he was writing for the afternoon Times.⁸⁷ The column name was changed from “Dr. Watson’s Needle” to “Quick Watson, The Needle,” which referred to Sherlock Holmes’ addiction to cocaine shots. “We were more innocent, or ignorant, then,” Watson wrote more than 40 years later.⁸⁸

⁸² Emmett Watson, “The Press Box: Yankee Stadium ‘Beheld,’” *The Seattle Times* 29 Sept. 1947.

⁸³ Watson, *Print* 20.

⁸⁴ Michael Fancher, “Seattle’s native son kept us connected with the city he loved,” *The Seattle Times* 20 May 2001.

⁸⁵ Brack, personal interview.

⁸⁶ Watson, *Print* 26.

⁸⁷ Brack, personal interview; Friel, personal interview.

⁸⁸ Watson, *Print* 27.

Branching Out

As a young journalist, Watson had thought Seattle to be a dull, backward town, and was eager to test himself in Los Angeles or New York. But as he began covering sports in far away places he realized that, with relatively clean air, the Cascade Mountains, the Puget Sound and mostly polite people, Seattle was heaven compared to most American cities. Also, several famous sportswriters like Red Smith convinced him to stay where he had a reputation.⁸⁹

Watson was never far from debt, even as a top columnist. The newspaper didn't pay much.⁹⁰ His salary was about one quarter that of Herb Caen, his contemporary at The San Francisco Chronicle.⁹¹ And it didn't help that he was a spendthrift.

So he sought alternate income. He served as Sports Illustrated's northwest correspondent from its inception in 1954 to the mid-1970s. In all, he wrote 22 bylined pieces for SI, including an extended profile of childhood friend Fred Hutchinson in 1957.⁹² As a catcher for Franklin High, Watson had caught for Hutchinson, then the city's top high school pitching prospect. Hutchinson later gained national fame with the Detroit Tigers, winning 95 games over 11 years and notching 18- and 17-win seasons in 1947 and 1950. Hutchinson possessed neither blazing speed nor a wicked curveball. He instead relied on pinpoint control and a raging, quiet intensity to propel him to victory. He later managed the Seattle Rainiers (in 1955 and 1959) and the major-league Tigers (1952-54), St. Louis Cardinals (1956-58) and Cincinnati Reds (1959-64), whom he led to a runner-up finish in the 1961 World Series.

⁸⁹ Watson, *Print* 125.

⁹⁰ Friel, personal interview.

To research the profile, Watson stayed with Hutchinson's team, the St. Louis Cardinals, for two weeks. He and Hutchinson were good friends, and Watson struggled to give a balanced account. "Hutch" was a gruff man, and not much for talking. He led by example, rarely with words. Watson gently prodded the stoic manager and learned to interpret the frequent silences and infrequent outbursts. He eventually extracted an elegant, revealing quote from the coach. The quote became famous, at least in Seattle.

"The ones who work the hardest are the ones who make it, the ones who win," Hutchinson said. "Sometimes that's the only difference. If you don't work hard at this game, you might as well hang them up. Sweat is your only salvation."⁹³

Occasionally Watson freelanced for Sport Magazine. In the 1950s, the magazine was on a tight budget and couldn't subsidize writers' travel expenses. Still covering Rainiers baseball, he wrote stories for Sport on road trips, with the P-I or Rainiers covering travel costs. He researched magazine articles during the day and wrote P-I columns at night.⁹⁴ As a magazine correspondent, he chronicled everything from professional baseball and football to hydroplane racing and women's amateur golf.

In the fall of 1954 Watson tried fiction, taking a class at the University of Washington. His professors taught him to write formulaic narratives geared to make money. The stories each had a likable, believable hero, a romance, and a problem for the hero to overcome.⁹⁵

Emmett was an instant success. His first story, "The Quarterback Who Couldn't Take It," is about a college quarterback whose hatred of a mean-spirited running back

⁹¹ Brack, personal interview.

⁹² Watson, *Print* 254.

⁹³ Emmett Watson, "Fred Hutchinson," *Sports Illustrated* 26 Aug. 1957.

⁹⁴ Watson, *Print* 254.

⁹⁵ *Ibid* 38.

leads him to quit the team. The quarterback's girlfriend finally convinces him to rejoin the squad, which he does just in time to win the big game.⁹⁶ Watson sold the story to the *Saturday Evening Post* for \$800, an amazing feat for a first-time freelancer. He appeared to be on the fast track to financial security. He even flew to New York to meet with Robert Fuoss, the *Post*'s managing editor, and Ben Hibbs, its editor. Doug Welch, a friend at the *P-I* and himself a successful fiction writer, persuaded Carl Brandt, a top New York literary agent, to take Watson as a client. But Watson never sold another story, though he tried many times.⁹⁷

At heart, he was a columnist. He had neither the time nor literary perspective to succeed as a novelist. He rarely read fiction or even practiced it much. He was too busy at the *P-I* – pumping out 1,000-word columns, reading newspapers, learning Seattle's history and staying in touch with its present. Besides, he excelled at journalism, and he loved it. His audience and clout were growing swiftly. He was paid to fraternize with famous, respected people, watch baseball games and put words on paper. The likes of Jack Dempsey and Denver Pyle came over for family dinners.⁹⁸ And none other than Royal Brougham was teaching him the craft.

Royal Brougham, Seattle's most storied newspaperman in the first half of the century, was a columnist and editor for 68 years. Watson called him "the eighth wonder of the world." During Brougham's best years, from about 1935 to 1955, he received more fan mail than the rest of the *P-I* staff combined. The pile of letters on his desk sometimes reached so high that passersby could barely see him.

⁹⁶ Emmett Watson, "The Quarterback Who Couldn't Take It," *Saturday Evening Post* 25 Sept. 1954.

⁹⁷ Watson, *Print* 38.

⁹⁸ Watson, personal interview.

According to Watson, Brougham was part poet and part P.T. Barnum, a man who relentlessly promoted his city, his newspaper and himself. Brougham, a “hard-shelled Baptist,” didn’t drink, smoke or stay out late Saturday nights – he rose early the next day to teach Sunday school.⁹⁹

Brougham had power. Governors, mayors, ministers, university presidents, coaches and fight managers sought his counsel. Though sometimes self-serving in columns, he was generous. When P-I management doled out huge pay cuts during the Depression, he slashed money from his own salary to keep the people working for him at the same wages. His staff didn’t find out for 10 years.¹⁰⁰ Over the years, he raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for charities. During World War II, he led promotions that raised more than \$250,000 for soldier recreation.¹⁰¹ He was “a man who gave a damn about practically everybody,” Watson once said.¹⁰² When Watson served under him at the sports desk, Brougham gave him editorial autonomy and even allowed him to put non-sports pieces on the sports page.¹⁰³

Brougham died in 1978, at age 84, after having a stroke while covering a Seattle Mariners game. His enduring legacy is Royal Brougham Way, a street named for him that travels between Safeco Field and Seahawks Stadium. It was Emmett Watson who first suggested the road be dubbed in his honor.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Royal Brougham is more than just another street name,” The Seattle Times 27 July 1999.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Johnson, <http://washington.theinsiders.com/2/53322.html?noredir=1> 9 July 2002.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Royal Brougham is more than just another street name,” The Seattle Times 27 July 1999.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

This, Our Town

The 1950s was a big decade for news. The Russians launched Sputnik I, and the Korean War thundered through the front end of the decade. Sen. Joseph McCarthy crusaded to rid America of communists. In 1954, the Supreme Court voted to integrate schools. After years of economic depression and war, the country seemed headed in the right direction. America's gross national product was increasing 50 percent, and citizens were rapidly moving out of dirty cities and into suburban enclaves.¹⁰⁵

In Seattle, Boeing began making the 707, America's first commercial jet airliner. This feat made Boeing the world's premier jet manufacturer and boosted Seattle's economy. By 1956, the Boeing payroll was putting almost \$8.5 million into the economy every two weeks. About 35,000 King County residents worked for the company. This was more than half of all manufacturing workers in the Puget Sound.¹⁰⁶

The average Seattle income jumped 34 percent during the 1950s. Blue-collar workers became middle class, capable of making down payments on sturdy houses. With a high school education or less, many earned good money at Boeing doing things like cutting sheet metal and fastening rivets. And business was brisk; retail sales almost doubled during the decade.¹⁰⁷ The Northgate and Bellevue Square shopping malls, two of the earliest urban malls in America, sprouted in north Seattle and Bellevue. Seattle grew fast; the newly built Alaskan Way Viaduct eased downtown congestion, and city limits expanded north to 145th Street. Bellevue, linked to Seattle by the Lake Washington Floating Bridge, became a prime residential area and veritable extension of the city.

¹⁰⁴ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Royal Brougham is more than just another street name," The Seattle Times 27 July 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, "Soaring to Prosperity," The Seattle Times 11 Aug. 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

With rapid growth came new problems – like pollution. The city had only one sewage treatment plant; no fewer than 14 pipes emptied raw waste into the Puget Sound. Beaches along Lake Washington were closed due to hurriedly built, leaking septic pipes. Fish couldn't survive in the Duwamish River because lumber and steel mills lining the waterway regularly dumped industrial scum.¹⁰⁸

These mills were also billowing noxious smoke into the air. Rapid population growth made air pollution even worse – automobile registrations increased by more than 100,000 from 1951 to 1956. A University of Washington study found Seattle's smog to be worse than Los Angeles.¹⁰⁹

Though growing in population and sophistication, Seattle was still in many ways provincial. Downtown had few restaurants and no nightlife to speak of. The biggest summer event was Seafair, an August festival famous for its hydroplane races. Seafair also featured parades filled with junior high bands and civic boosters dressed as raiding pirates. Event organizers were trying to promote tourism and advertise the city's maritime heritage. They wanted to build Seattle's reputation as a world-class, cultured city.

The reality, though, was that Seattle still had a small-town feel. Seattle natives made lifelong bonds with rooted families and childhood friends. Distinct clans of Irish, Italians and Scandinavians still lived in the neighborhoods of their forebears. It was a friendly town; car drivers picked up strangers waiting at bus stops so they wouldn't be stuck in the rain.¹¹⁰ Journalists covered Eagle-Scout awards, and residents calling with

¹⁰⁸ Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, "Doing the dirty work," The Seattle Times 15 Sept. 1996.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Friel, personal interview; Halpin, personal interview.

even the frailest of stories usually got into the newspaper.¹¹¹ UW homecoming queens consistently made the front page. Even as late as 1963, a story about a man charged with walking on the wrong side of the road received a page-one spread and 40-point headline.¹¹² A couple days later, an ice parade dress rehearsal garnered the same treatment.¹¹³ If a reporter was sent to investigate an alleged American Indian burial site and discovered only a rusted Coca Cola can, he was expected to write a story about the cola can. Editors didn't waste gasoline readily; reporters were expected to return to the newsroom with stories.¹¹⁴

Notwithstanding these hokey, local-angle features, journalists of the time were chronicling issues with important consequences to Seattle's growth and future. With all that was happening, sports seemed boring and silly by comparison. Watson grew tired of scrawling out endless scorecards and quoting cliché-spewing athletes. By the mid-1950s, he decided he wanted out of the sports beat, which he called "an overfished lake."¹¹⁵ In 1956, he began a career as a legendary columnist who owned his city, much as Herb Caen owned San Francisco.

The transition from sports to the city scene started when several downtown restaurateurs approached the P-I to propose subsidizing an "around town" column. The restaurant owners hoped a nightlife column would persuade citizens to head downtown after dark and, of course, patronize sponsoring restaurants. Watson saw his opportunity to flee the sports page and convinced editors to let him write the weekly column. Paid \$100 a week for the three-dot column, he continued to write a sports column four times a

¹¹¹ Jim Leong, personal interview, 4 June 2002; David Syferd, personal interview, 3 June 2002.

¹¹² "Houghton 'Wrong-Side-Road Walker' Freed," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 13 Nov. 1963.

¹¹³ "Tonight's The Night: Iceparade Dress Rehearsal," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 15 Nov. 1963.

¹¹⁴ Halpin, personal interview.

¹¹⁵ Ottenberg, personal interview.

week.¹¹⁶ The nightlife column was called “This, our Town,” and debuted in August 1956.

The introduction to his first column reads:

Editors of the Post-Intelligencer are understandably joyous about this new experiment. They argue (and rightly) that people who don't read my stuff in the sports pages have been getting off too blamed easy. Hardship, they say, toughens up a reader. This column, only a few words old, already has much in common with those produced by Walter Winchell, Ed Sullivan, Herb Caen and Cedric Adams. When I say “much in common,” I mean it will appear in a newspaper. For the most part, this column will touch on general topics, like books, plays, alimony, dining, starving and up-to-the-minute trends in bee culture. Don't worry. It will be the kind of a column that children can read – if you force them to.¹¹⁷

Ernest Hemingway

It wasn't long before Watson became nationally known in the non-sports arena. In March 1959, he bumped into Ernest Hemingway during a Sun Valley, Idaho skiing trip. The two met at a restaurant when someone invited Hemingway, who lived in nearby Ketchum, to sit at Watson's table. During their conversation, Hemingway spoke about boxing, skiing, sportswriters, his books and the movies that were made from them. Watson took notes and sent a story to the Post-Intelligencer.¹¹⁸

Later that week, Watson bumped into Hemingway again. This time Hemingway opined on Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution, which had occurred two months earlier. Despite being besieged by international media, Hemingway previously had refused to comment on Cuba, where he still owned a farm and was a celebrity resident.

The famed author was an authority on the country after living there for many years. “The Old Man and The Sea” was about a Cuban fisherman, and “To Have and

¹¹⁶ Brack, personal interview.

¹¹⁷ Emmett Watson, “This, Our Town,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 14 Aug. 1956.

¹¹⁸ Emmett Watson, “This, Our City: A Drink with Hemingway,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 4 March 1959.

Have Not” had Cuba in it. Hemingway didn’t want to be misquoted on a touchy subject. An inflammatory remark could imperil Cuban friends and complicate his own hoped-for return to the island.¹¹⁹

But the author opened up for Watson. Hemingway told him he harbored hopes for the rebellion because Cubans supported it, and that he hated the brutal Batista regime overthrown by the revolution.¹²⁰ He also said the public trials and executions of Batista’s people were necessary. “A lot of them were thieves, sadists and torturers,” he said. “They tortured kids, sometimes so badly they would have to kill them. The Castro movement promised the Cuban people that Batista’s men would be punished. The new government has to carry out its promises.”¹²¹

Also, Hemingway said that he doubted Fidel Castro had the strength to carry out the revolution. Watson didn’t include this in the story, though, because Hemingway feared the statement would be too explosive in Havana.¹²²

Lacking paper and pen, Watson listened carefully and tried to remember everything. Afterward he typed copious notes from his hotel room. Later that day, he asked Hemingway if he wanted to check his notes for accuracy. “I think you probably got it right,” Hemingway said.¹²³

The scoop, Watson said, “was blind luck and I wrote it badly, but it was much headier stuff than snapping jock straps and fighting for tidbits of sports news that nobody seemed to care about.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Hemingway’s writing made his literary audience care,” *The Seattle Times* 6 July 1999.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Watson, *Digressions* 92.

Watson's story was an international scoop. Wire services picked it up from the P-I and sent it around the world. "I have often wondered why Hemingway, never far from big-name journalists, picked me, a small-caliber mouthpiece, to unload on," Watson wrote later. "I don't know. But I know he was gentle, cheerful, funny and unpatronizing."¹²⁵

About two years after the Cuba conversation, Watson had another chance to prove his mettle when Hemingway shot and killed himself while struggling with cancer.¹²⁶ When Watson heard this, he asked managing editor Ed Stone to send him to Ketchum. He took a train into town, where he joined a mob of reporters from around the world. Hemingway's wife, Mary, and friends were telling the press that Ernest had accidentally shot himself while cleaning a rifle. Watson didn't believe a lifelong hunter and gun collector would shoot himself by accident. So he and a friend, Time magazine's Barry Farrell, scoured the town to learn the truth. They interviewed tens of residents, including Hemingway's bartenders and maids, and his typist. They finally got one of the sheriff's officers to disclose, on the condition of anonymity, that Hemingway had committed suicide.¹²⁷

Watson wrote the first story reporting Hemingway's death as suicide.¹²⁸ Again, the scoop went around the world. A couple of months later Mary Hemingway confirmed suicide as cause of death.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Hemingway's writing made his literary audience care," The Seattle Times 6 July 1999.

¹²⁶ <http://www.americanwriters.org/writers/hemingway.asp>.

¹²⁷ Watson, Print 75.

¹²⁸ Emmett Watson, "Hemingway's Death Is Suicide," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 7 July 1961.

¹²⁹ Watson, Print 75.

Dot Dot Dot

By 1960, Watson's nightlife column (morphed into "This, Our City") was running three times a week and his sports column only twice. His non-sports columns included a combination of gossip items strung together as well as extended, single-topic essay columns. He gradually broadened the column's scope to whatever interested him, writing items about nearly every aspect of Seattle life. It proved so popular that in 1962 his editors allowed him to drop the sports column and write about the city six days a week. Watson wrote a column announcing the change:

Barring flood, hurricane, war, famine, pestilence and an author's hangover this thing will, indeed, appear six days a week. Add up all those disasters and compare them to a steady diet of Watson and what have you got? Not much to choose from. As usual, this will be a column in depth. I mean it will be 18 ½ inches deep. After a long consultation of editors, it was decided that there will be no basic change in format, meaning it will continue to be printed black-on-white, instead of vice-versa.¹³⁰

When Carol Ottenberg began working for Watson in 1964, the city had only a few good restaurants and scarce nightlife. Seattle's World Fair had just ended; the Seattle Repertory Theatre offered one of a few cultural attractions.

"You didn't have a lot going on," Ottenberg said. "It was relatively easy for the two of us to cover the dot-dot-dot aspect of Seattle's happenings. There weren't the same number of newspapers and columnists that there are today. Emmett was practically the only game in town."¹³¹

By 1969 the column no longer needed a title. His name was enough, and his hold on the daily habits of Post-Intelligencer readers was almost as powerful as morning coffee.

¹³⁰ Emmett Watson, "'This, Our City' Expands," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 19 Nov. 1962.

¹³¹ Ottenberg, personal interview.

“During those years the Pulitzer people were strangely silent about my work,” Watson later said. “But once, when I interviewed George Lincoln Rockwell, the American Nazi, he told me I would be high on his hit list when he came to power. I must have done something right.”¹³²

For research, Watson investigated all avenues of the city. He figuratively pounded on doors, becoming an expert on Seattle’s key players, its government, cops and courts, restaurateurs and chefs, ministers and fight managers, and many other characters who made the city special. Everybody knew him.

He rarely had to pay for a drink or a meal. Restaurateurs gave him special attention and treated him like a good friend. A gourmand and burgeoning alcoholic, Watson took advantage.

Most of Watson’s about-town columns ran in the three-dot format, a popular column-writing style in the 1950s and 1960s. In three-dot columns, several news and gossip items are placed in a single column with each item separated by three dots. The columns required the ability to communicate – often with word coinage – newsy or humorous items in a brief space. They also required skill in making complicated subjects seem straightforward. Watson learned to tweak and stretch the format so it could say just about anything he wanted.

New York gossip columnist Walter Winchell first popularized this type of column, which is now nearly forgotten. Its greatest practitioner was probably Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle. Watson was very good at it, and was called “one of the

¹³² Watson, *Digressions* 20.

greats” by none other than Caen, his role model in column writing.¹³³ Here’s an example of Watson’s three-dot writing from 1963:

One of the pet peeves of the state highway department is the lack of consistent wording on signs. There’s more than one way of saying, “Don’t Walk.” In San Francisco’s Chinatown, the sign written in Chinese transfers literally into “Walking man from here across street not allowed.”... My age-old campaign to get more downtown sidewalk awnings always seems to end in a drizzle, if you get The Message ...

Now, there’s all this talk about a sports stadium – how big, what kind, where? I still think the county would go for the bundle, 25 or 30 million bucks, for a domed, all-purpose showpiece. Let’s not kid ourselves, kids, it rains here ... Will all the candidates for mayor please step forward? Oh, now we’ve got another committee ... A psychiatrist could explain why I always scuff a toe everytime I buy a new pair of shoes. A psychiatrist could, but he isn’t going to ...¹³⁴

According to Ottenberg, Watson stuck to a fairly consistent routine when making a three-dot column. Ottenberg usually arrived at the P-I at 9 o’clock and began searching newspapers for item ideas. At 10 o’clock, she started calling sources from the office Rolodex to see if they had worthy ideas. Though sources sometimes called the office with news, more often Watson and his assistants did their own legwork. Watson generally came in at about 10 a.m. Once settled, he read a newspaper or book until about 11:30 a.m., when he and Ottenberg went to lunch. They spent anywhere from one to three hours at lunch, according to Ottenberg:

He wouldn’t do anything for hours on end, but internally he would be working. But, I mean, he would come in late and sometimes in half an hour we’d be gone to lunch. We’d go to the 610 (Restaurant) or Trader Vic’s, sit in a dark atmosphere and he’d have a couple martinis. Then we’d have lunch. The restaurant manager would come over to say “Hi.” People from other tables would come over to talk.

And afterwards Emmett sometimes wouldn’t want to go back to the office, so we’d go shopping. Emmett was an inveterate buyer – he must have had 14 leather jackets. And then, finally, we’d go back to the office. I can remember days when

¹³³ Jon Hahn, “Lesser Seattle’s press secretary Emmett Watson dies at 82,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 12 May 2001.

¹³⁴ Emmett Watson, “This, Our City: Jottings In A Daydream,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer 6 Nov. 1963.

we wouldn't get back until 3 p.m. I mean, I had things to do; there was a column to do.

But Emmett was just biding his own time. I still have dreams that I'm in the office and there aren't enough items for the column. The deadlines were relentless; they were with you every single day. But I don't think it ever bothered Emmett. I think he always knew there was a column somewhere.¹³⁵

In the afternoon they compiled and organized items. Watson fielded phone calls, added old, unused items and, finally, shaped the items into a column. He usually took about 45 minutes to actually write a three-dot column, and rarely stayed past 5 o'clock.¹³⁶ In more than 50 years of newspapering, he missed a deadline six times.¹³⁷

Though his assistants compiled many of the three-dot items, Watson always wrote his own stuff.

"Contrary to what some people thought," Ottenberg said, "nobody ever wrote the column but Emmett."¹³⁸

Watson himself described his daily routine like this:

Nobody ever called and asked me to surrender him to the police; nobody above the level of a municipal garage attendant ever sought my counsel. There were days when nobody called at all. A normal day's work was pretty routine. It consisted of hours spent with a phone to the ear listening to things like this: "Hey, I got a great story but you can't print it." "Here's a hot one, but you'll have to clean it up." "I do okay at lunch, but my dinner business is dying, so how about a little squib? A plug never hurt anybody."¹³⁹

Once or twice a week, Watson wrote single-topic, 1,000-word essay columns. In these columns, which contain his most recognized material, he freely displayed his personality and opinions.

¹³⁵ Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Watson, *Print* 65.

¹³⁸ Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹³⁹ Watson, *Digressions* 25.

At his peak he was writing six columns a week and, according to friends, it never came easy.¹⁴⁰ To handle the dailiness of it, the column became his top priority and constant preoccupation. He rarely spoke when thinking about a column, which was most of the time. According to Ottenberg, he sometimes ruminated for hours before beginning to write, allowing ideas to form and coalesce in his head:

When he was getting ready to write a column, especially a theme column, he was almost like an expectant father. He would go out and pace the halls, hands in his pockets, hunched over. Walking along – not talking to anyone – just walking the halls, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Then he'd come back into the office, smoke a couple more cigarettes and then go out and walk the halls again.

It was all in the process of working ideas through his conscious or subconscious. Eventually, he would come in and sit down at his typewriter, and pour out his thoughts.¹⁴¹

When he finally was ready to write, the column came quickly and with seemingly little effort. That's because the writing had already taken shape in his brain during the hours spent pacing and smoking. He said he never experienced writer's block.

“When the time comes, you deposit your seat on a chair and begin to expound,” he said. “Mostly you have delayed so long that there is no alternative.”¹⁴²

Watson's office was in the middle of the newsroom – next to the P-I's huge, deafening Teletype. Its incessant drone drove his assistants crazy. But Watson was too hard of hearing to notice. Neither the Teletype nor the constant newsroom chatter affected his concentration. When at last he started to write, his focus was unrivaled.¹⁴³

He was a perfectionist in his writing – an expert of pacing, word-rhythm and brevity. He enjoyed molding phrases to surprise and stimulate the reader. He didn't have

¹⁴⁰ Brack, personal interview; Friel, personal interview; Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹⁴¹ Ottenberg, personal interview.

a set, conscious method of organization – his approach differed each day. “Emmett’s art was in his artlessness,” said friend Fred Brack, a longtime P-I reporter. “His columns were beautifully constructed, so stylish that they never showed the underlying support beams.”¹⁴⁴ His finished columns rarely required revision, though sometimes editors changed a comma or two.¹⁴⁵ Watson himself wasn’t sure how he put out a column:

How do you write a column? How the hell should I know? I’m not sure what a column really is. But since we have so many sex therapy experts who are eager (for a fee) to teach us how to copulate skillfully, someday we may get word therapists who can tell young geniuses how to achieve orgasms with the reader. I only know that columnists come in all shapes, sizes and conditions of literacy.¹⁴⁶

He was an expert interviewer. A quiet man – due mostly to hardness of hearing – he played introversion to his advantage. He became a practiced listener who let others talk. He took only minimal notes during interviews, waiting like a tiger for a tasty morsel to come along. He relied on an exceptional memory – column quotes were rarely verbatim, but contained the gist of the sources’ words. He became such a big name that few questioned if they’d actually said what Watson put to print. “He portrayed himself as a bumbling innocent,” Fred Brack said, “and that was part true – but he was also a shrewd judge of character, extremely observant and analytical. Everything was grist for his columns.”¹⁴⁷

“Watson knew how to get people to open up,” Brack said. “If an interviewer came wanting to know his life story, he wouldn’t get very far. Emmett was subtle. In his quiet way, he would divert attention from himself and by the end of the interview he’d know

¹⁴² Watson, *Print* 65.

¹⁴³ Friel, personal interview; Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹⁴⁴ Brack, personal interview.

¹⁴⁵ Brack, personal interview; Friel personal interview; Halpin, personal interview.

¹⁴⁶ Watson, *Digressions* 33.

¹⁴⁷ Brack, personal interview.

everything about the person and the person wouldn't know the first thing about Emmett."¹⁴⁸ Though he called himself "the social equivalent of a blocked punt,"¹⁴⁹ he was a conversationalist. He was patient, and usually was thoughtful and gentle toward sources. "People trusted and respected him," Brack said.¹⁵⁰

When someone got under his skin, on occasion he'd lash out. In the 1980s, television cook Jeff Smith, also known as the Frugal Gourmet, made the mistake of saying "I'm sorry but I can only give you a half hour," before starting an interview. They were at Mr. D's Greek Delicacies in the Pike Place Market, and Watson was feeling peevisish. At Mr. D's, customers take numbers when ordering food. The pair had barely started the interview when the cashier called out number 71. Smith looked up and answered, "I'm 71."

"Really," Watson responded. "You look much older."

Watson kept him for an hour and a half, asking questions about his childhood, his house, his tax return – topics that would never appear in the column. Finally, he looked up very coldly from his notes and said, "I have kept you an hour and a half. You are dismissed."¹⁵¹

Den Mothers

Through the years several assistants walked in and out of Watson's office. These assistants, Watson said, acted as secretaries, counselors, den mothers and copy editors.¹⁵² They also served as housekeepers, for Watson rarely cleaned. For 50 years he smoked

¹⁴⁸ Brack, personal interview.

¹⁴⁹ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: My puppy is one of the last true hell-raising anarchists," The Seattle Times 22 June 1999.

¹⁵⁰ Brack, personal interview.

¹⁵¹ Halpin, personal interview.

three packs a day of unfiltered Luckies. He'd smoke until his cigarette butts were only a quarter inch, then line the butts along the edge of his desk in an orderly row. His assistants cleaned up the butts – it was part of the job.

In 1964 his first assistant, Sharon Friel, went on maternity leave, leaving Watson without an aide.¹⁵³ He hired New York native Carol Ottenberg after seeing a classified ad she placed that highlighted her communications background. Ottenberg, fresh out of New York, was broke and boarding at the downtown YMCA for \$2 a night.¹⁵⁴ After she had been working for Watson a couple of weeks, he asked where she was living. She told him about the YMCA. "Jesus," he said, "that's going to ruin the image of the column." He picked up the phone and called the general manager of the Olympic Hotel, a ritzy establishment across the street from the Y.

"When I got home that night," Ottenberg said, "there was a bellman waiting for me. He carried my stuff across the street from the Y to the Olympic. Emmett had cut a deal with the Olympic manager that for \$75 a month I would live there – the normal rate was about \$50 a night. I lived there for two months until I got my feet on the ground."¹⁵⁵

At the Olympic, Ottenberg met former Teamsters president Dave Beck and fight manager Jack Hurley, who also were renting rooms. Beck was checked in under an assumed name. He had just been released from the McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, where he spent two years on a tax evasion conviction.¹⁵⁶ Both Beck and Hurley were Watson's longtime friends. This was the only time Ottenberg would meet the two celebrities, though the columnist devoted thousands of words to them through the years.

¹⁵² Watson, *Digressions* 25.

¹⁵³ Friel, personal interview.

¹⁵⁴ Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Dan Raley, "The rise and fall of labor giant Dave Beck," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 3 Dec. 1999.

Watson preferred to do his legwork by phone or outside the office. He rarely invited people, no matter how famous, to his office because he saw them as unneeded distractions.¹⁵⁷

Lesser Seattle

In the mid-1950s, Emmett Watson invented the loosely knit "Lesser Seattle Inc." with the goal of discouraging rampant urban growth and immigration. He founded the tongue-in-cheek movement when he and a group of friends – artists, advertisers, lobbyists and journalists – gathered one day for lunch at the old 610 Restaurant on the corner of 6th Avenue and Pine. The lunch conversation drifted toward a current civic booster organization, Greater Seattle Inc., whose goal was to increase industry, tourism and population in Seattle. Greater Seattle had started Seafair in 1950.

During that fateful lunch Watson's friend, advertising artist Marlowe Hartung, spoke against all the boosterism.

"What we really need is a Lesser Seattle," Hartung said. "I like this city just the way it is."¹⁵⁸

Watson agreed; he too was tired of all the boosterism. He soon appointed himself founder and president of Lesser Seattle Inc. His first Lesser Seattle column appeared in 1957. He wrote hundreds more in the next 40 years.¹⁵⁹

With Watson at the helm, the only-partly-joking crusade tried to keep Seattle unspoiled by stopping massive urban development and slowing immigration from

¹⁵⁷ Friel, personal interview; Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹⁵⁸ Emmett Watson, "We could be so much less if we stopped being polite," *The Seattle Times* 5 July 2000.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

California and other states. Lesser Seattle's official motto said it all: "Have a nice day – somewhere else."

Lesser Seattle was Watson's curveball way of celebrating the city – he didn't think it needed much improvement. Using humor to expose the absurdity of unregulated growth and mindless booster campaigns, his movement resonated with locals who were watching rich Californians bid up Seattle housing prices. Referring to Lesser Seattle's supporters as KBO (Keep the Bastards Out) Agents, he exhorted them to warn tourists and would-be immigrants of Seattle's earthquakes, torrential rains, mudslides and constant cloud cover. Watson said KBO agents usually had the following characteristics:

If you know Smith Tower was once the tallest building west of Chicago, if you are aware Alaskan Way used to be Railroad Avenue, if you remember when Rosellini and Canlis were restaurant trend-setters, if you really gave a rip about which hydroplane won the Gold Cup, if you pine for the days you could get into Sicks' Stadium bleachers for 75 cents, if you couldn't afford Littler's high-style suits and if you remember when you didn't have to pay \$12 for "early-bird" parking: You are probably a diehard member of Lesser Seattle.¹⁶⁰

In a 1969 column, Watson recommended a "committee on rain" be formed to travel across America bragging about Seattle's ugly weather:

The committee on rain would travel extensively – especially to places like California, the East and the Midwest. Texas-style, they would boast about our rain to a point where nobody would want to come here. Those damned Californians are overrunning us now, and the trend must be stopped. Keep Seattle small and comfortable by inserting large, institutional ads in Life, Look and Holiday proclaiming: "If rain gets you down, stay away from Seattle."¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Lesser Seattle's mission: be tough on millionaires," The Seattle Times 31 Aug. 1999.

¹⁶¹ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Love That Rain," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 26 Dec. 1969.

In a 1979 column, Watson told Lesser Seattleites to pray for a huge rockslide at the Cascade's Snoqualmie Pass, an event that might stop rampant growth once and for all:

The disappearance of the Hood Canal Bridge shows what can be accomplished with a little luck. Does any red-blooded Lesser Seattleite fail to dream of a giant rock slide at Snoqualmie Pass? Mother Nature accomplished the Hood Canal sinking with no injuries or loss of life; surely, she can do the same at Snoqualmie Pass. One envisions it happening, with no injury to anyone, at precisely the right time: just after the last resident has traveled safely over the pass, leaving on the other side a convoy of Winnebagos and other highway battleships, bound here from all over the Midwest.¹⁶²

Besides Watson's published rants, the movement did little besides print bumper stickers that declared, "Seattle's rainy season – September to July."¹⁶³ In 1988, the organization published a calendar highlighting historic dates in Lesser Seattle history, including:

- Jan. 6, 1953, when rain fell in Seattle and continued for 33 consecutive days.
- Oct. 12, 1962, when the Columbus Day storm triggered a power outage during the World's Fair. The Space Needle's elevator got stuck at the halfway point, terrifying many tourists.
- March 7, 1871, when a historian wrote: "Mud lies so deep in Seattle streets that a passerby notices a man's hat poking up from the mire. Nobody wants to lift the hat to see who, presumably, is underneath. Instead, citizens check to see if anyone important is missing in town."¹⁶⁴

The trend of rampant Californian immigration seemed to culminate in the late 1980s. In 1988, the average Seattle home price jumped from \$88,900 to \$110,000. In

¹⁶² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: President Speaks," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 18 Feb. 1979.

¹⁶³ Brack, personal interview.

1989, it reached \$137,000.¹⁶⁵ That year The Seattle Times sent Watson to California to meet the enemy. He made the journey in his motor home with his poodle, Tiger. At the time, the invasion of Californians into the Puget Sound was a nationwide story. Watson was interviewed by scores of media, some of whom thought they were talking to the leader of a serious hate movement. The Chicago Tribune, L.A. Times, Time magazine, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, London Times, “Good Morning America,” Dan Rather’s “CBS Evening News” and Peter Jennings’ “World News Tonight” interviewed him for his perspective.¹⁶⁶ Californians were getting riled up over Watson. It got so bad that Jim Halpin, a friend staying in Watson’s RV (while Watson and a girlfriend roomed in a hotel), was nervous someone would break into the RV with a loaded pistol and say, “Take that, Emmett Watson.” Things never went this far, but Watson did create a moderate media stir.

The press seemed to ask the same questions. At first, Watson replied frankly. He explained that Lesser Seattle was a frame of mind, a concept. Lesser Seattleites didn’t really hate Californians, but were disgusted with boosters and senseless growth. Eventually he grew bored giving the same answers and, in the name of satire, started making things up.¹⁶⁷

Once when someone asked, “How many members in Lesser Seattle?” Watson said there were 320,621 KBOs.

“Is that an up-to-date figure?”

“Of course it is, I just made it up.”

¹⁶⁴ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: We could be so much less if we stopped being polite,” *The Seattle Times* 5 July 2000.

¹⁶⁵ “Dubbed the ‘decade of greed,’ ‘80s started out quite lean,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 24 Dec. 1999.

¹⁶⁶ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Missing the Point,” *The Seattle Times* 8 Oct. 1989; Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Man-in-the-Street Speaks,” *The Seattle Times* 4 Feb. 1990.

¹⁶⁷ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Man-in-the-Street Speaks,” *The Seattle Times* 4 Feb. 1990.

“Really? Is that ethical?”

“No, but it’s up-to-date.”¹⁶⁸

Another time, Watson explained the origins of the organization, saying Lesser Seattle was a three-martini concept. “I stumbled on it while I was drunk in a bar,” he told the reporter.¹⁶⁹

More than 40 years after he founded Lesser Seattle, Watson admitted he and his KBO guerrillas were losing the war. “Looking back on past Lesser Seattle campaigns, I feel that our greatest weakness is our infernal politeness. Seattle natives (and there are many) still can’t find it in their hearts to be rude to visitors.”¹⁷⁰ Despite setbacks, he continued to infuse columns with Lesser Seattle notions. Through the years, editors pushed him to alert readers of the dangers of Californian immigrants. It made good copy, and readers sent letters. This changed in the 1990s, when Watson rode with a Boise cab driver who hailed from California and didn’t know it was Watson in the back seat. Watson asked the driver if he’d been given any heat about his home state. The driver said yes, he was constantly being picked on by locals who cited Watson’s Lesser Seattle rants as evidence of his inferiority. Watson felt terrible. He stopped berating Californians, and instead focused on other things.¹⁷¹

During the 1990s information technology boom, Watson became suspicious of the “software geeks” and other nouveau riche who had proliferated. He lambasted what he saw as the entitlement attitude of these young professionals with their sport utility vehicles, six-bedroom houses, 14-hour workdays and obsessions with money. These “dot-com dingoes” were having a negative effect on Seattle:

¹⁶⁸ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Missing the Point,” *The Seattle Times* 8 Oct. 1989.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

As anyone can plainly see, this is a very high hog we are riding. They are lucky, these kids, these Microsofties. They got born to good parents and went to good schools and got into a high-rolling tech game.

These young richies are like George Dubya, the millionaires' president in waiting: He was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple.¹⁷²

Computer nerds – or geeks, if you prefer – are not substantial citizens. Certainly not in the way our forebears were – solid, shingle-weaving, tree-topping, halibut-eating, lutefisk-loving, sweat-stained sons of nature ... Worst of all, (a software professional) is cheap. When he gets his millions, he buys a Maserati or a Mercedes, maybe a big house without a wife in it. Then he stops contributing to the economy. He wouldn't spend a quarter to watch an ant eat a bale of hay.¹⁷³

Of course, some were offended by these generalizations about software employees. They wrote letters to the editor complaining of Watson's bigotry and mistaken assumptions. One such letter writer, Susan Spezza, suggested that these rants were exposing an emerging senility – Watson should lay his typewriter to rest once and for all:

Watson inaccurately assumes software geeks are unmarried men, making 15 references to "he," while in fact, one out of three Microsoft employees is a "she." In my group alone, women outnumber men by 27 percent, 76 percent are married and collectively we account for 25 children.

I wonder if the board of directors of the Red Cross, the Washington Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, the Seattle Art Museum, the Woodland Park Zoo, United Way and the hundreds of other nonprofits on the receiving end of record-setting donations from Microsoft employees, would agree with Watson's comment that we are selfish and self-centered.

I am happy to count today as the last time I'll ever read an Emmett Watson column, and hopefully the day the staff at The Seattle Times will re-examine its criteria for columnists. It's time to put Watson out to pasture!¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: We could be so much less if we stopped being polite," *The Seattle Times* 5 July 2000.

¹⁷¹ Halpin, personal interview.

¹⁷² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Arrogance born of luck infects the 'new' Seattle," *The Seattle Times* 14 March 2000.

¹⁷³ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Lesser Seattle's mission: be tough on millionaires," *The Seattle Times* 31 Aug. 1999.

¹⁷⁴ Susan Spezza, letter, *The Seattle Times* 10 Sept. 1999.

It's unlikely Watson was hurt. He figured as long as he'd gotten people to care enough to write a letter, he'd done his job.

Gentle Power

When an issue riled Watson up, he wrote fearlessly about it. He said he felt free to write about almost any topic and state any opinion. "Self censorship," he said, "has ruined more columnists than free drinks."¹⁷⁵ Whether complaining about the influx of downtown skyscrapers, urging the preservation of the Pike Place Market or defending ethnic minorities and gays, he seldom pulled punches.

"He liked to shake issues up," said his daughter, Lea Watson, "make people angry, get them talking and want to change things."¹⁷⁶

In 1971, Watson crusaded for an initiative that sought to turn Pike Place Market into a seven-acre historical district. The initiative was sponsored by "Friends of the Market," a grassroots group led by Victor Steinbrueck. Steinbrueck was an architect, University of Washington professor and lifelong Seattle resident.

The initiative was needed, Watson said, because downtown business leaders planned to put a \$100 million development in the area – complete with 1,400 apartment units, a 500-room hotel and a 4,000-car garage. At the time, a number of powerful city officials and business leaders thought Market buildings posed a fire and health hazard; the buildings were a "decadent, somnolent fire trap," in the words of Mayor Dorm

¹⁷⁵ Watson, *Print* 221.

¹⁷⁶ Watson, personal interview.

Braman.¹⁷⁷ “Friends of the Market” insisted that Pike Place needed only a few repairs and should be mostly left alone.

The Pike Place Market was born in 1907 so farmers could sell fresh meat, produce and other products to consumers without middlemen gouging prices. Though it’s seen many changes, it retains a pre-industrial charm that belies its proximity to the downtown retail district. Located on a cliff overlooking Elliott Bay, Pike Place has become a city treasure. It is Seattle writ small, a seven-acre strip that’s a haven for buyers, tourists and social life.

Today it holds more than 500 shops. Merchants selling spiced oils and vinegars, piñatas, cutlery, magic tricks, hotel rooms, antiques, tamales, fortune readings, pepper jellies, baseball cards, French cream puffs and halibut line Pike Place in close succession. With so many stores catering to so many interests, people who’ve lived in Seattle for decades return time and again. It has odd juxtapositions. Next to Cafe Campagne, a haughty French cafe, a grimy street musician plays piano – belting out the blues on a hot June day. On the street, a couple of minivan drivers fight over cramped parking, not noticing that the trashcans are lined with tulips. Nearby, the world’s first Starbucks Coffee shop wedges between a Mexican grocery and a homely hardware store. And under the famous “Public Market Center” neon sign, a hundred tourists watch strapping lads throw fish at the Pike Place Fish Co. Directly below, in the Market’s labyrinth basement, a grim proprietor stands outside the door of his Christmas light store waiting for a customer.

It is hard to feel alone at the Market. Class seems forgotten amid the bustle of commerce and friendly shop owners. It holds people of every pigment, nationality and

¹⁷⁷ Sharon Boswell and Lorraine McConaghy, “Saving a time, and a place,” The Seattle Times 27 Oct. 1996.

net worth, and contains enough column ideas for a lifetime. Conversations are everywhere.

Back in 1971, Watson tried to convince Seattleites of the value of this public marketplace in the heart of downtown. He called the Market a world-renowned symbol of the city and a “living thing.” “It is a babble of voices,” he said, “different languages, different accents. It is the incredibly beautiful displays and colors of vegetables; its very tackiness is part of its charm and a living reassurance that things are not all plastic in this Saran-wrapped world.”¹⁷⁸ Watson was just one of many to publicly urge the Market’s preservation. But his voice was persuasive. On Nov. 2, Seattle voters passed the initiative to “preserve, improve and restore the Pike Place Market” and “prohibit alterations, demolition, or construction” without approval of a 12-member commission.¹⁷⁹

In the 1960s and 70s, Seattle, like many metro areas, witnessed civil rights marches, a growing gulf between young and old, assassinations, and protests against the Vietnam War. Watson was middle aged, but his ideologies resembled those of the era’s radical students. He consistently defended the Black Panthers, anti-war protesters, women’s rights advocates and gay rights supporters who were challenging the nation’s status quo.

In the late 60s, a P-I editor posted a notice banning employee facial hair. Watson, infuriated, thought this unfairly targeted young employees and began growing a beard to

¹⁷⁸ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Pike Place Market,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 1 Nov. 1971.

¹⁷⁹ Alice Shorett and Murray Morgan, *The Pike Place Market: People, Politics, and Produce*, (Seattle: Pacific Search Press, 1982) 139.

support his younger colleagues. Though it was “a pretty crummy beard – thin and spotty,” according to Carol Ottenberg, the notice came down.¹⁸⁰

He condemned the Vietnam conflict from start to finish. He called himself a charter member of President Lyndon Johnson’s “Nervous Nellies” – those Americans who opposed escalating the conflict in its early stages. He criticized the U.S. government’s deceit, and its support of what he called a fundamentally racist war. In 1969, he stood on the steps of the U.S. Courthouse in downtown Seattle to read off several hundred names of dead soldiers.¹⁸¹ When the conflict finally simmered, New York Times columnist James Reston suggested no American was without responsibility. Watson, on behalf of fellow doves, refused to share blame for what happened.¹⁸² He held a longstanding “malignant revulsion” toward President Richard Nixon, who practiced “middle-of-the-gutter politics.” In a column titled “Nixon, The Last Goodbye,” he bid the disgraced president good riddance: “A nightmare of horrors was the legacy of this base, banal, unctuous man,” he wrote. He then reminded citizens that voter complacency was responsible for Nixon’s rise and warned Americans that future leaders like him could threaten democracy and lead to more futile wars.¹⁸³

In the fall of 1978, he rallied support against a proposed initiative to allow housing and employment discrimination against gays and lesbians. He wrote:

The more one hammers away at this topic, the more unnecessary it seems. All we are saying, really, is that 10 percent of us are “different” from the rest of us. Taking their rights away – by initiative, for God’s sake – isn’t going to make this society one whit more livable, safe or fulfilling. Let us fret about more important matters and accord people the respect and compassion that one human being owes another.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Ottenberg, personal interview.

¹⁸¹ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: A Vietnam Vigil,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 16 Nov. 1969.

¹⁸² Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Vietnam Blame Game,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 9 April 1975.

¹⁸³ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Nixon, The Last Goodbye,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 9 Aug. 1974.

¹⁸⁴ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: The Rights of Man, and Woman,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 8 Oct. 1978.

He frequently used his column to expose the absurd banality of city issues. This is shown in an excerpt from a 1979 P-I column titled "Vice Squad Follies":

I tell you, friend, this was one shocked columnist who read some accounts in the papers this week. Stunning revelations came out of discussions between Police Chief Vanden Wyer and Mr. Bob Royer, deputy mayor of Seattle. All about the question of robing, or disrobing, among vice-squad agents making a pinch (that is street slang for arrest; nothing more). Vanden Wyer came out like a monk against disrobing. He said he "halted operation" when some officers took off their shirts in the company of prostitutes. The Chief did not say if he burst in the room and halted the pinch (slang term again), but he seemed to speak from firsthand knowledge.

Deputy Mayor Royer had a vastly different view. He said he understood the cops would strip to their underwear to make a pinch (again, street slang). He said he understood "they have an underpants rule, that they can strip but they can't drop their pants."

Clearly this is a matter for the Police Guild. If disrobing is outlawed, only outlaws will disrobe. The Police Guild must prepare for another initiative campaign. It sponsored (and helped pass) an initiative that prescribed how officers can shoot people, and with what bullets. A prominent Police Guild member sponsored an initiative to de-citizenize homosexuals. Plainly, another initiative is called for – if we unshackle police with guns, we should undress them in the cause of morality.¹⁸⁵

His acclaim resulted from his intimate knowledge of Seattle and its citizens.

People wanting to know the inside scoop read his column. At Watson's memorial service, former Seattle mayor Bob Royer said the six most terrifying words he could hear upon arriving to work in the morning were, "Did you see what Emmett wrote?"¹⁸⁶

Age didn't quell his liberal leanings. In the early 1980s, the Moral Majority, a conservative, Christian political force, was insisting that its leaders received political advice from God. In a column, Watson said the group wouldn't let him speak to God because liberals didn't qualify. So he instead telephoned the devil for political counsel:

I said that several things trouble me about the election. The Moral Majority is exhorting both candidates to cut taxes. "Thirty percent, forty percent. The Moral Majority doesn't want abortions, but we're up to our ears in people right now. They want to protect the unborn. They've got Reagan and Carter promising more missiles, more subs, more troops, more ding-dong doomsday bombs, invisible airplanes, fail-safe delivery systems, more military bases. Is God telling them all this?"

I heard a devilish crackle on the line. "It is my policy," the Devil finally said, "never to mention my opponent by name during a campaign. But the answer is no, my opponent is not telling them all this. Even my opponent is smart enough to know that you can't cut taxes and build zillions worth of lethal hardware. Even he knows the irony of their position. If you are going to protect the unborn, well and good. But if you protect a few million unborn and end up killing 100 million of the already born, it's a travesty in arithmetic. How delightful!" he snickered.¹⁸⁷

Political conservatives sometimes responded vehemently with mounds of mail.

Watson seldom opened the envelopes. Having read scores of rants, he believed he could recognize vitriol by the author's penmanship.¹⁸⁸

Though he was outspoken on most major issues, Watson was careful not to upset his publisher. He rarely wrote something that made his employers look bad for fear of being fired. "Emmett didn't understand that his power was such that newspaper bosses were more afraid of losing him than he was of losing his job," Fred Brack said.¹⁸⁹ Unlike Royal Brougham, Watson didn't use his clout to promote himself. "He wore his power very gently and very quietly," Carol Ottenberg said. "Always the bumbler, stumbler, mumbler. But he was not above taking a free lunch."¹⁹⁰

Though he interviewed scores of well-known personalities, he stayed humble. The list includes names like Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates, U.S. Supreme Court Justice

¹⁸⁵ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Vice Squad Follies," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 18 Jan. 1979.

¹⁸⁶ Friel, personal interview.

¹⁸⁷ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Speak to the Devil," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 5 Oct. 1980.

¹⁸⁸ Brack, personal interview.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ottenberg, personal interview.

William O. Douglas, Teamsters Union president Dave Beck, legendary Washington Sen. Warren G. Magnuson, novelist Tom Robbins, Yankees manager Casey Stengel, boxing great Jack Dempsey and Watergate miscreant John Erlichmann. Several famous sources became friends. But Watson rarely dropped names. People who knew him for decades were astonished when conversation revealed that he once had hobnobbed with Casey Stengel and Dave Beck.¹⁹¹

He also knew the city's eccentric characters, people like Rudi Becker – a man Watson called the city's most inventive prankster. One time in 1963, just before a rain shower, Becker drove slowly along downtown Seattle's 2nd Avenue, spilling Sea Dye all over the street. When it rained a few minutes later, residents lined the curbs to watch the Sea Dye turn 2nd Avenue a brilliant green.¹⁹²

Another favorite column subject was former Seattle real-estate magnate and philanthropist Henry Broderick. Broderick never owned a car and spent, in 1970s currency, almost \$2,500 a year on cab fare. In his 70s, he became seriously ill and required a blood transfusion. Twenty-seven cab drivers showed up at his hospital to donate blood.¹⁹³ He was a wealthy and influential Seattle pioneer, a close friend of Boeing founder Bill Boeing. But, like Watson, he didn't take himself too seriously. His favorite story on himself concerned an encounter with a homeless man. Broderick was looking out the window of his downtown office when he spotted the man rummaging through a garbage can. With a crumpled dollar bill, Broderick went over to him and began poking in the garbage. He then feigned finding the dollar in the heap.

¹⁹¹ Brack, personal interview.

¹⁹² Emmett Watson, "This, Our City: Rudi Becker," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 27 Jan. 1963.

¹⁹³ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Henry Broderick," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 9 May 1972.

“Hey, look what I found,” he said. “A dollar! Look, you were in this garbage can first, so why don’t you take it?”

The destitute man took the bill and said, “Yeah, I guess some rich bastard threw it away.”¹⁹⁴

Free Time as Column Fodder

It seems Watson and column writing were a perfect match. He loved to learn new things; the job let him quench this inquisitiveness. Watson had many hobbies, most of which he regularly mentioned in columns. When he found an enjoyable pastime, he followed through with it until he was an expert. As a columnist he had quick access to knowledgeable sources. To learn more about a hobby, he simply called an authority to schedule an interview. In his 40s, he took up skiing, tennis, photography and airplane flying. In his 50s, cooking was his craze. And in his 60s he became a devoted dog owner. These pursuits readily translated into interesting columns.

In 1961 he began flying “because it’s there.”¹⁹⁵ In coming years he flew a Tutor Canadian jet above Puget Sound¹⁹⁶ and retraced the route of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in a Cessna 172.¹⁹⁷ In 1998, Watson was awarded the Distinguished Service Award of the Western Washington Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. At the banquet, U.S. District Judge William Dwyer said his friend was one of the best pilots in an elite class of those who were “surviving pilots who are both deaf and absent-minded. If you haven’t flown with Watson in a small plane in a thunderstorm, while he

¹⁹⁴ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Henry Broderick,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 9 May 1972.

¹⁹⁵ Emmett Watson, “This, Our City: Learning to Fly,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 23 July 1961.

¹⁹⁶ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Flying a Canadian Jet,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 7 Aug. 1974.

¹⁹⁷ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Tora, Tora, Tora,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 20 Oct. 1975.

tries to remember whether a catchy phrase was written by Ring Lardner or Red Smith, you have missed one of the thrills of aviation!”¹⁹⁸

Watson began cooking seriously in the mid-1960s as he watched Julia Child’s cooking shows and read her book, “Mastering the Art of French Cooking.”¹⁹⁹

He soon began concocting culinary experiments to try out on friends. Once he arrived unannounced at the house of a friend, Betty Bowen, with a bag full of groceries. Bowen was prominent in her own right – she’d been a director of the Seattle Art Museum, an original member of the Seattle Arts Commission and one of the founders of the Pacific Northwest Arts and Crafts Center. She also had fought to preserve the Pike Place Market in 1971. Bowen’s kitchen was being remodeled – her sink was gone and the rest of the kitchen was shredded. Nonetheless, Watson insisted on cooking dinner there. “She was furious,” Carol Ottenberg said. “But once Emmett made up his mind that he wanted to prepare a meal for someone, that’s what he was going to do.”²⁰⁰

Though Watson enjoyed food, he didn’t go out to eat a lot with other people, according to Ottenberg. “He’d go to Rossellini’s 610. Most of the business establishment was there, and Emmett didn’t like most of them. Occasionally he’d go to lunch with a sports reporter or somebody else, but he was really a lone ranger.”²⁰¹

Part of his assistant’s job was to accompany him at lunch. When the time came to fill out an expense account, Watson went through his Rolodex and picked out names to use as excuses for his lunches.²⁰² His favorite foods included corned beef and cabbage, liver and onions, bratwurst, potatoes and oysters. His eating habits wouldn’t have made a

¹⁹⁸ Jon Hahn, “Lesser Seattle’s press secretary Emmett Watson dies at 82,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 12 May 2001.

¹⁹⁹ Ottenberg, personal interview.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

heart doctor happy.²⁰³ In fact, he had a heart attack in 1985 while traveling in California. This resulted in triple-bypass heart surgery and ended his piloting days.²⁰⁴ It also became the subject of his next column, which began, “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...”²⁰⁵

He often opined on foods, especially oysters. He first tried them at age 13 when his father bought some oyster beds in Willapa Harbor, Wash. It was “love at first slurp.”²⁰⁶ In 1979 he and a friend, Sam Bryant, opened Seattle’s first oyster bar at Pike Place Market. For two years Emmett Watson’s Oyster Bar was the only game in town. His entrepreneurship started a trend, and today dozens of Seattle restaurants offer oysters. Though he sold his interest in 1987, the bar still bears his name.²⁰⁷ Small and modest, it’s decorated with marine paraphernalia, beer ads, blue-and-white checkered tablecloths and menus printed on brown paper bags. The bar, still popular among seafood aficionados, has become a local institution for oysters on the half shell, clam chowder and fish and chips.

The oyster bar was a labor of love, not money. He wasn’t a man emotionally attached to his income.²⁰⁸ He was a garage-sale junkie, and not afraid to spend. “He bought things for the pleasure of buying,” Fred Brack said. “He wasn’t extravagant. If he had money, he’d spend it on knick knacks.”²⁰⁹ A single candleholder, international food spices, old ashtrays and ceramic poodles were just some of the things he bought at garage sales.²¹⁰

²⁰³ Ottenberg, personal interview.

²⁰⁴ Watson, personal interview.

²⁰⁵ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: My Heart Attack,” The Seattle Times 18 June 1985.

²⁰⁶ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: Love at First Slurp,” The Seattle Times 16 August 1990.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Emmett Watson, “Emmett Watson: A Fool and His Money,” The Seattle Times 2 April 1987.

²⁰⁹ Brack, personal interview.

²¹⁰ Watson, personal interview.

He was also a sucker for the internal combustion engine. Over the years, he accumulated a glut of old and used cars, trucks, trailers and boats.²¹¹ He couldn't fix them, though sometimes he tried. If a car broke down, he would trade it in before taking it to a mechanic. Acquiring automobiles was always more interesting than having them repaired.

One evening in the 1960s Emmett returned late to his family's West Seattle home because he couldn't find street parking. He opened the door and began cursing those responsible for his tardiness. His face reddened as he screamed about the lousy quality of a neighborhood where he couldn't even park his car on the road. As he raged, he appeared even angrier than intended because the near deaf Watson couldn't judge the volume of his voice. Then, in the middle of the diatribe, all of the sudden, he realized most of the cars on the street belonged to him.²¹²

"Car dealers in Seattle probably had their own memorial when (Watson) died," Lea Watson said.²¹³

In 1975, Watson and Brack bought a speedboat. Watson had phoned Brack and said, "How about we both chip in and buy a boat?"

"OK, I guess," Brack answered.

"Good, because I just bought one."

Since Watson was broke at the time, they spent Brack's money. They took the boat on the Puget Sound only twice that summer. In the fall a storm sank the boat. The two decided to have it completely redone, with an overhauled engine and new electrical

²¹¹ Brack, personal interview.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Watson, personal interview.

system. But, as often happened with Watson, before long he grew bored and decided to sell the boat.²¹⁴

Reading was another of his passions. Open books, magazines and newspapers were haphazardly spread across his apartment floor. His office included books by John Lardner, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway and E.B. White.

“That’s not to say he had an extensive library in there,” Carol Ottenberg said. “In the first place if he had had one, he couldn’t have found it. His office was always total chaos. Cigarette butts, papers everywhere, half-finished cups of coffee, unopened mail, unanswered mail that went back years. Everything was under a three-inch layer of dust. It’s a wonder I’m still alive.”²¹⁵

When he learned to navigate the Internet, Watson spent hours reading online newspapers and magazines. Twentieth-century biography and history held much of his attention. Baseball, boxing, food, flying, Bill Gates and Seattle history were other favorites. He was a fast reader, sometimes consuming two big books a day.²¹⁶

Exercising was not one of his hobbies. His enduring limp from polio may have had something to do with it. More likely it was because he didn’t like working out and was preoccupied making columns. Though he skied, its singular appeal was that it was downhill. He hated walking uphill, and would circle a parking lot for 15 minutes to get 10 feet closer to where he was going.²¹⁷ He was a lifelong member of health clubs, but only attended during orientations.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Brack, personal interview.

²¹⁵ Ottenberg, personal interview.

²¹⁶ David Ishii, personal interview, 18 June 2002.

²¹⁷ Ishii, personal interview.

²¹⁸ Watson, personal interview.

Column Break

In 1982 Watson left the Seattle P-I after 33 years. He'd grown tired of daily deadlines and needed a change. Also, a new editor from Canada had treated him like a no-talent rookie, quickening Watson's departure.²¹⁹ Even after leaving, he continued to write two freelance columns a week for the P-I. This stopped when he wrote a column unfavorable of then-Seattle Mariners owner George Argyros. A developer from California and owner of a losing baseball team, Argyros had few Seattle friends. Unfortunately for Watson, one of them was P-I publisher Virgil Fassio. After the Argyros column, a managing editor informed Watson that his columns were being cut to once a week. Watson told the editor he might as well make it zero columns a week.²²⁰

He then accepted a job offer from friend Lou Tice to join the Pacific Institute, a personal motivation company. There he wrote motivational textbooks, corporate biographies and introduced Pacific Institute leaders to Seattle's media and business community. Tice gave Watson time to write his first book, "Digressions of a Native Son." The book, which included sketches of Seattleites he admired, became a local bestseller.²²¹

When he returned to journalism, in 1983, it was to The Seattle Times, for which more than 30 years earlier he had covered baseball and written a sports column. The managing editor who hired Watson, Alex Macleod, was the son of Henry Macleod – the Times editor who hired Watson the first time.

²¹⁹ Brack, personal interview.

²²⁰ Jack Broom, "Emmett Watson, 1918-2001; Seattle loses its longtime chronicler," The Seattle Times 12 May 2001.

²²¹ Ottenberg, personal interview.

"You are not getting a debutante," Watson told Times readers upon his return. "I worked here before, from 1946 until the winter of 1950, at which time I excused myself to go on a minor errand, promising to return right away. That was 33 years ago, and I apologize for the delay."²²²

He said he was part of the deal in the 1983 Joint Operating Agreement between The Times and the Hearst Corporation, owner of the P-I. "It was announced The Times would give up 16 obsolete IBM typewriters in exchange for several barrels of ink and a columnist to be named later," he explained. "The latter is me."²²³

His column appeared twice a week, on Tuesdays and Sundays, and he worked at home. Cutting down on workload wasn't his idea. Editors and advertisers were discovering that women were big newspaper readers – hiring female columnists might sell more papers, they reasoned.²²⁴ Much of the column space had been given to Jean Godden, a good friend. Watson said he wasn't bitter. When starting out in the business, he'd been given a fair shot while women hadn't. This was only justice.²²⁵

With more free time, Watson wrote three more books. "Once Upon a Time in Seattle," comprising tales about colorful Seattleites of the past, came out in 1992. "My Life In Print," an annotated anthology of his newspaper and magazine writings, followed in 1993. A year later, California photographer Robert Cameron published "Above Seattle," a collection of aerial photographs that Watson explained in text. Only "Above Seattle" remains in print.

²²² Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Return to The Times," *The Seattle Times* 30 Oct. 1983.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Friel, personal interview; Halpin, personal interview.

²²⁵ Brack, personal interview; Friel, personal interview; Halpin, personal interview; Watson, personal interview.

Tigers

At *The Times*, Watson continued to write about Seattle, its people, politics, ideas, travel, food and books, as well as about himself and a succession of miniature poodles named Tiger. Beginning in 1980, Watson's dogs were constant companions. The first, Old Tiger, as Watson referred to him after the dog died, was apricot-colored. A white poodle arrived from a Texas breeder even before Old Tiger's death because Watson feared solitude. This dog was known as Tiger Too. When a car killed Tiger Too, Watson immediately called the breeder. As soon as possible he flew to Texas to pick up another white Tiger.²²⁶

Like most important things in his life, the dogs were subjects of many columns. He wrote about, among other things, the dogs' genealogy, neutering, sexual habits, food preferences, barking behavior and lack of licenses.²²⁷ The Tiger columns were popular with readers, and the canines became celebrities. In the mid-1990s, Watson, Fred Brack and Tiger went to a party at a Pioneer Square apartment. After awhile Brack and Tiger decided to leave, while Watson stayed to socialize. Waiting outside for a cab, Brack held Tiger in the crook of his arm. He noticed a woman had been staring in his direction for awhile, and thought maybe his fly was open. Finally, the woman turned to her companion and said, "Look honey, it's Tiger." She walked over and began petting the dog's head. Then she looked at Brack and said, "And that means you must be Emmett Watson." "You're half right," Brack responded.²²⁸

²²⁶ Watson, personal interview.

²²⁷ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Neutered Tiger III can only be champion outside the show ring," *The Seattle Times* 22 Feb. 2000; Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Man's best friend, a consummate con artist," *The Seattle Times* 5 Oct. 1999.

²²⁸ Brack, personal interview.

Watson and one Tiger or another seldom were apart and frequently traveled together. He often took Tiger in his camper or Cessna. "Tiger has only one fault as a copilot," Watson wrote. "Just before takeoff, when I've got the throttle jammed to the firewall and we're almost up to rotating speed, Tiger paws impatiently at my white knuckles on the throttle. There is no mistaking the signal. He wants his stomach scratched."²²⁹

He wasn't above noting Tiger's sexual proclivities. In a 1981 column written during a Mount Baker camping trip, he showed his dry wit by relating Old Tiger's encounter with a female cocker spaniel. The dog "(broke) his thermostat," Watson wrote. "In my own cowardly way I tried to disown Tiger, turning my back on this awful scene, pretending I didn't know him. The lady wasn't fooled. 'This your dog?' she said. 'Yes,' I said lamely, 'I guess it's the French in him.'"²³⁰

In the introduction to "Once Upon a Time in Seattle," Watson thanked Tiger, who appeared on the cover with Emmett. And when he attended signings for his books, he brought a paw stamp with him so Tiger could sign too.²³¹ Someone once wrote a letter to the editor complaining that Watson wrote only about dogs and dead people. Watson responded by writing a column on dead dogs.²³² He defended his devotion of column after column to his pet poodles:

Certain sophisticates and other insensitive fauna chide me for writing at undue length about my dog. The chorus goes like this: "Kosovo! Housing for homeless! Taxpayer ripoffs! Weighty subjects every day! And you bore us with talk about your poodle. What do you say to that?"

I say, "Tough beans."²³³

²²⁹ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Return to The Times," The Seattle Times 30 Oct. 1983.

²³⁰ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Camping with Tiger," Seattle Post-Intelligencer 7 Aug. 1981.

²³¹ Brack, personal interview.

²³² Halpin, personal interview.

²³³ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Thank Poodle Heaven: Tiger III descends," The Seattle Times 13 April 1999.

When Tiger Too was run over by a car in the winter of 1999, Watson said he'd never before experienced a winter "so guilt-ridden, so desolate, so lonely."²³⁴ For him, the dogs were more than just grist for columns; they were companions in his old age.

"(Tiger) overlooks my slovenly habits, my warts, wattles, eccentricities and dubious net worth," Watson wrote. "He forgives everything, all my faults, all my foibles. No human has ever done that."²³⁵

Column's End

Watson spent his prime in a time when heavy drinking, smoking and keeping late hours were almost prerequisites to a journalism career. He himself was a poster boy for this lifestyle. A lifelong unrepentant smoker, he didn't give a rip about second-hand smoke. He once smoked in front of a female acquaintance with lung cancer. The woman's husband dragged him outside to ask if he knew she had lung cancer. "I know," Watson replied. He owned a framed photograph of Winston Churchill holding a Tommy gun. "Thank You For Not Thanking Me For Not Smoking," its inscription read.²³⁶ He continued to smoke in public places long after it was out of style. When he ate at downtown's Union Street Grill they gave him a table in the corner, surrounded by fake plants, so the rest of the restaurant wouldn't smell his Luckies.²³⁷

He was an alcoholic for much of adulthood. For years, he'd have three-martini lunches and three-martini dinners. For years, he'd stay late at bars with colleagues and sources. One of these bars, The Grove, was a notorious P-I hangout across the street from

²³⁴ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: Thank Poodle Heaven: Tiger III descends," The Seattle Times 13 April 1999.

²³⁵ Ibid.

the paper's old building on 6th and Wall. Now a retirement home, it probably helped many a scribe along the path to early retirement.²³⁸

Watson enrolled in several alcohol treatment centers through the years, but continued to drink into his 70s. Former wife Betty was a nurse who worked in drug and alcohol rehab. "The worst mistake Emmett ever made was getting rid of me," she once said.²³⁹ His disease wasn't obvious. Close friends were clueless about his problem.²⁴⁰ As a drunk, he wasn't loud, boorish or abusive, and he could hold his liquor. It was just that when he drank he became less involved as a friend and parent.

In 1997, the Watsons were having a family crisis: Emmett's daughter, Nancy, had lung cancer and Betty had a brain tumor. Emmett was back to his old drinking ways. Daughter Lea Watson hated to see him drinking when his family needed him. "My sister is dying, my mother has a brain tumor. We need your support. We don't need another sick person in the family," she told him.²⁴¹

So she, Bill Dwyer and an AA counselor confronted him. Emmett owned up to it, and that night was off to The Sun Down M Ranch in Yakima, Wash., where he spent a month. When he came back from the treatment facility he stayed sober, and never drank again.²⁴² Betty survived the brain tumor; Nancy died later that year.

As a senior citizen he took several RV trips with friends and Tigers. In the spring of 2000, he and Jim Halpin, a retired P-I reporter, decided to take a spring vacation to Palm Springs. The plan seemed simple enough. They would drive to Utah in Watson's

²³⁶ Halpin, personal interview.

²³⁷ Friel, personal interview.

²³⁸ Leong, personal interview; Syferd, personal interview.

²³⁹ Halpin, personal interview.

²⁴⁰ Brack, personal interview; Friel, personal interview; Halpin, personal interview; Leong, personal interview.

²⁴¹ Watson, personal interview.

²⁴² Halpin, personal interview; Leong, personal interview; Watson, personal interview.

Jeep Cherokee. After resting a night in Ogden at the house of his niece, Pat Coryell, they'd take her RV to Palm Springs.²⁴³

The trip to Ogden was pleasant. But upon arriving they found an RV that hadn't moved from his niece's front lawn for eight straight summers and winters. The thing wouldn't start.

Coryell's husband was dying slowly of lung cancer. Emmett couldn't stand being around the sick and was anxious to move on. Also, the spring heat was keeping them in the house, where column ideas were few. He liked to stay moving – to meet and interview people. “You can't interview scenery,” he said.”²⁴⁴ Every day Coryell said she would have the RV fixed, and every day it stayed broken. Finally, after almost two weeks, the carburetor was repaired and the RV started. It was Friday afternoon. Coryell suggested they wait till Saturday morning before heading to Palm Springs. But Emmett was ready to get the hell out of there, so they left that evening. They would regret it.

The plan was for Watson to drive the RV and Halpin to follow in the Jeep. As soon as they hit the highway, though, Watson took the first wrong exit into a Salt Lake City slum. Soon they were lost in a shady neighborhood, in thick traffic. Watson was leading them deeper and deeper into the abyss. After driving a meandering and clueless 50 miles through Salt Lake City, Halpin finally decided something needed to be done.²⁴⁵

He tried honking to get Watson's attention. But Watson's hearing aid was set to low, and the radio was blaring. Probably lost in a reverie, he heard nothing and kept driving. At 2 a.m. Halpin took a frantic chance, racing in front of the RV and slamming

²⁴³ Halpin, personal interview.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

the brakes. “Emmett, we’re lost!” he screamed. Emmett quickly agreed, and they decided to stay the night in a ratty motel. Watson slept in the motel room, Halpin in the RV.

In the morning the RV wouldn’t start so they borrowed jumper cables from the hotel. By this time Halpin was pretty frustrated, but Watson was taking it in stride.²⁴⁶ Sunday at noon they pulled into Genoa, Nev. Genoa was the state’s first white settlement, established by Mormons in 1851. Watson, smelling a possible column, wanted to stop and look around. On Sundays, the town of 240 is pretty much shut down. It’s also nestled at the base of the Sierra Mountains and more than 30 miles by highway from Carson City, the closest sizable city. The pair stopped at the town’s lone gas station. Not wanting to push their luck, they tried filling up with the engine still running. But the attendant almost blew a gasket about this, so they turned it off. It cost them \$1,800.

By the time a mechanic had fixed the carburetor, they were three weeks behind schedule and still almost 500 miles from Palm Springs.²⁴⁷ They made it to Palm Springs all right, but their problems didn’t end there.

Spring in Palm Springs is off-season and usually not crowded. But for some reason they couldn’t find a motel. Place after place refused to house them.

So they stayed in the RV. The heat was sweltering – 100 degrees in the shade – and the RV’s air conditioning was wrecked because rats had bitten into its electrical wires. Also, the septic tank was leaking, forming a pool next to the RV that was attracting every fly in Palm Springs. So they had their choice of sitting outside on lounge chairs swarming with bugs or roasting in the RV. Halpin finally figured that motels weren’t giving them rooms because whenever the RV pulled into a place Tiger III’s constant

²⁴⁶ Halpin, personal interview; Watson, personal interview.

²⁴⁷ Halpin, personal interview.

yelping dissuaded them. After four miserable days, they finally found a room when Watson registered by himself. Tiger III and Halpin sneaked in later.

By this time Halpin couldn't take it anymore. For the 70-year-old Halpin, the trip had been a debacle. He'd lost 10 pounds in four days from all the sweating, and decided to fly home the next day. But Emmett, nearing his 81st birthday, was unflappable. Nothing seemed to bother him. He stayed in Palm Springs another month, writing columns and bustling around town like someone half his age.²⁴⁸ As was typical for him, the columnist understated his Palm Springs ordeal. His April 4, 2000 column began like this:

For those who may be interested, my poodle Tiger and I are ensconced among the worldly and prosperous in the desert clime of "Poodle Springs." If you want to find us, we're in an RV camp, our highway dreadnought in slot 54. To get here, you go out Date Palm Avenue, past Dinah Shore Drive, and turn right at the first billionaire you see. That's us, the one with the busted-out air conditioner. "Poodle Springs" – the title of Raymond Chandler's last novel – is also known as Palm Springs. It's where the great wise-cracking, moody private eye, Philip Marlowe, came to live after he married a rich divorcee. "Poodle Springs" was set in Palm Springs and was Chandler's worst novel because he had the bad grace to die while writing it. Somebody else finished it for him, and that was the end of whodunit's greatest shamus.²⁴⁹

Watson wrote for The Times until the fall of 2000, when he went on strike with the Newspaper Guild. His last Times column appeared Nov. 11, 2000, though he continued to write for the Seattle Union Record, the strike paper, until he became sick.²⁵⁰

In March 2001, doctors found a burst aneurysm in his abdomen. He underwent surgery at the Virginia Mason Hospital Medical Center on March 21, but slowly got worse. For Watson, being relegated to a hospital bed and unable to smoke was almost worse than the awful pain of the burst aneurysm. Eventually, he recognized that he was

²⁴⁸ Halpin, personal interview.

²⁴⁹ Emmett Watson, "Emmett Watson: The sun always rises in 'Poodle Springs,'" The Seattle Times 4 April 2000.

on his way out and that his days of exploring, interviewing and writing were over. But he kept his sense of humor. “Once you make up your mind about it, it’s not so hard to die,” he told a friend. “At least I don’t have to write any more columns.”²⁵¹

Watson died from surgery complications on May 11, 2001. He was 82.²⁵²

Hundreds of people came to his memorial service at Town Hall to honor the man who had chronicled Seattle for half a century.²⁵³ It was a cloudless spring day with a warm breeze coming in from the southwest – a disastrous type of day for Emmett’s Lesser Seattleites.

²⁵⁰ Jack Broom, “Emmett Watson, 1918-2001; Seattle loses its longtime chronicler,” The Seattle Times 12 May 2001.

²⁵¹ Halpin, personal interview.

²⁵² Jack Broom, “Emmett Watson, 1918-2001; Seattle loses its longtime chronicler,” The Seattle Times 12 May 2001.

²⁵³ Watson, personal interview.